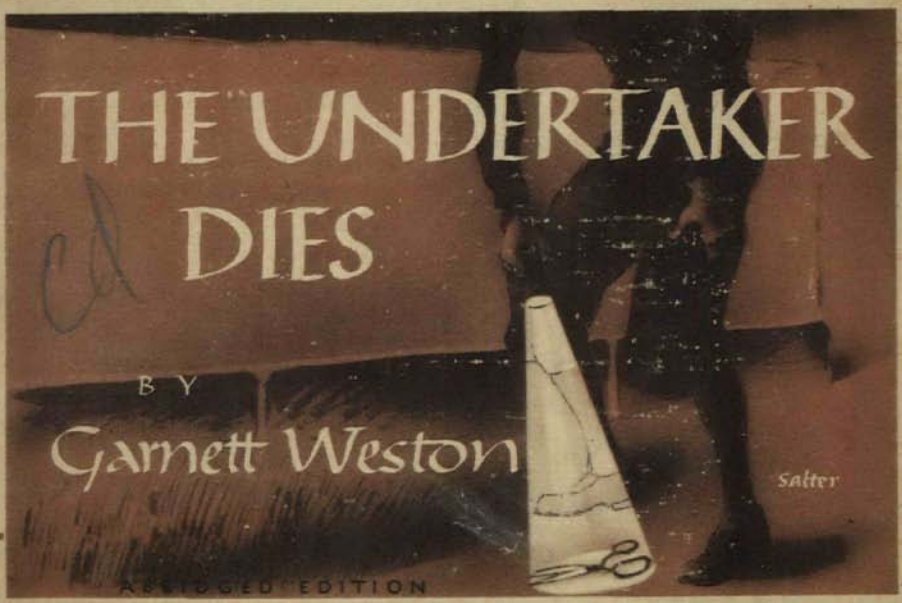
A Mercury Mystery



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THE UNDERTAKER DIES

BY

GARNETT WESTON

ABRIDGED EDITION

A MERCURY MYSTERY

THE AMERICAN MERCURY • NEW YORK

LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK, *Publisher*

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FOREWORD

There is no reason a tale of murder should not also be a story of love.

You will observe a difference is intended between a love story and a story about love. The first suggests something Victorian in which the noblest emotions animate the characters. Heart and head are mightily disturbed. Other parts of the anatomy are ignored. One must admire the industry which produced a million love stories without once telling the truth about the subject.

Things are changed nowadays. Street-walkers and school-girls mean very much the same thing when they talk of love. The word is physical rather than sentimental in its meaning. Whether this is a love story, a story about love or a tale of murder, you may decide for yourself.

It might begin in the Street of Death where morticians hold their stereotyped services in little chapels rank with crowded flowers. It might begin by a lonely camp-fire where even lonelier men crouch in their blankets, aloof from each other as the desert stars above. Pieces and pawns are far apart on this September night. Inevitably they will come together and inevitably the undertaker will die. Time alone is needed. Even as we think of it, the fire sinks and the stars glow brighter. Time and Fate are the web and the loom, weaving patterns of life and death.

Before you settle too comfortably in contemplation of this tale, you might look about you a little. Are you quite, quite sure of yourself and your friends? Has anyone a reason to wish you ill? Murderers sometimes need only a little thing to inspire them, often only an unsuspecting victim. Move your chair so there won't be such a huge shadow behind. Perhaps it might be wise to draw the blind, and lock your door. The key is lost? That is unfortunate. Well, suppose you sit *facing* it!

GARNETT WESTON

MERCURY MYSTERIES *are chosen from the hundreds of mysteries published every year — for their pace, literary quality and readability. Sometimes they are reprinted in full, but more often they are cut to increase the speed of the story — always, of course, with the permission of the author or his publisher. This book has been cut.*

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COVER AND TYPOGRAPHY BY GEORGE SALTER

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CHAPTER ONE

MRS. SARAH RECKON had no thought of sudden death as she stood in the darkened hall of her own home, peering into Poldrate Street on this particular night. As for thinking anyone might want to murder *her*, such a preposterous idea had never occurred to her and never would — until it was forever too late.

Before we venture with Mrs. Reckon on her nightly foray into neighbours' gardens for the flowers she was too lazy to cultivate, it might be of interest to know something about the street in which, if you persevere, you are going to spend the next three days, and where you will meet some very odd people.

Poldrate was scarcely a block long and a blind end at that. It opened off Happen Street, itself an unimportant avenue of middle-class houses. Less than a hundred yards away, along Happen, was Washington Street where the traffic of a great city flowed with tireless insentience. But Poldrate, with its five tall, old-fashioned houses, surrounded by surprisingly large gardens, was a stagnant backwater, almost unknown to the gaudy life which whirled beyond it. Forty years ago, when every roof had an attic and every gable was ornate with scrolls, the five were the centre of fashion at its architectural flossiest.

The five houses, with their walled-in gardens, were on the north side. Across from them was a high, windowless brick wall belonging to a brewery yard. The people of the street rather liked the privacy the blank wall afforded their little community.

The gardens of the five houses had grown far beyond the discouraged efforts of Tim Gordon, the street's odd-job and general handyman, who did little more than explore their depths from time to time with an unused pruning knife as a sort of gardener's token visit. Flowers seeded themselves year after year, producing beds of riotous colour. Vines matted the ground, climbing walls and the trunks of palms and acacias. There were fountains whose pools had not been cleaned for years.

Mrs. Reckon's house was the smallest of the five. Of the same architecture as the others, it had been erected as a dovecote for newlyweds, fledged from families in the larger houses. Newlyweds and parents had long since vanished from the scene, gone with the brief aristocracy which hovered over this section before nameless thousands came from the middle west and spread Los Angeles over half the county. Mafia Breene, the undertaker who occupied the house at the blind end of Poldrate Street, might have told Mrs. Reckon the fates of some of the former occupants. Not that Breene had been in business then, but the books taken over from his predecessor no doubt contained these small, depressing histories.

The street in Mrs. Reckon's time cared little for its past. Certainly the Gordons, who occupied the next house, were much more interested in the problem of scraping together the month's rent of forty dollars. Just what the Pallings on the other side of the Gordons' were interested in, Mrs. Reckon hadn't the remotest notion. Doctor

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Palling and his wife, Violet, were in the society group of the street. So, too, were Joseph Sleep, the elderly bachelor, and Mafia Breene, the undertaker. Sarah Reckon and the Gordons were not.

Tonight, there was something going on in Joseph Sleep's ornate house. Mrs. Reckon hadn't been able to learn a great deal about it, but she knew the Pallings and Mafia Breene were there. It was a sort of introduction for the red-headed girl who had come from the east to live with Joseph Sleep, who was her guardian. Mrs. Reckon hadn't had a chance to see the girl yet, but Mrs. Gordon said she was pretty.

Standing in her hallway, she spied impatiently upon the street. As a rule, her nightly raid was over and done with by this time, but the activity in Sleep's house, with its attendant comings and goings, rendered Poldrate a little hazardous for her.

Considering her very real love of flowers and the fact she had so much ground at her disposal, one would have thought Sarah Reckon would grow her own blooms. But although capable of considerable energy and ingenuity upon occasion, she was anything but industrious. Besides, to her way of thinking, there was no thrill in simply going into her own garden and picking flowers, careless of who saw her. Raids under cover of dark, *they* were exciting.

Tonight's expedition was something special. The letter which inspired it crackled in the pocket of her dark house-dress. Her nephew, Jimmie Lane, was coming home.

Jimmie was a fighter. He went from one small town to another, picking up what change he could when promoters offered him a little work with the gloves. Mining camps, dude ranches, jerk-line cattle centres, it was all the same to Jimmie. Usually, his fights brought him fifty dollars, minus whatever commission the promoter thought fit to collect for his own services. Once in a while, he got a main event and earned a hundred. On the dark side were the intervals between fights, when capital melted away in gasoline and repairs for the battered roadster in which he travelled, food, lodgings and other necessities. It was rarely that he sent anything to Mrs. Reckon. Not that she needed it, of course. She did very well with occasional nursing jobs. But she did wish Jimmie would settle down in Los Angeles and really go to work. He had promised he would, sometime.

All the rooms must be gay with flowers for Jimmie's homecoming. Arranging them would take time, and because there were other tasks requiring attention before she retired, Sarah was anxious to get on with her raid. Realizing that for quite five minutes there had been no foot-fall in the street, she decided to risk a start.

With the wicker basket on her arm, she stepped on to the porch, closing the door noiselessly. The basket, painted black, contained a pair of black gloves and scissors. She stood for a moment, listening. Satisfied, she went down the winding path to the front gate, keeping on the grass because gravel grated noisily no matter how carefully one walked. She had watered earlier and the ground was still wet, but she didn't mind.

At the gate, she leaned over the top rail, peering the brief length of the street.

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Carefully, she computed the flowers needed to decorate her rooms. More than usual, of course. Bouquets for the hall, living-room and dining-room. Three for Jimmie's room, and as many, she supposed, for the spare room. The other man would have to go into the spare room, she thought resentfully. She didn't know why she should go to all that trouble for a tramp, and there was no other way to describe him, the stranger Jimmie was bringing. He didn't call him that in the letter, but Sarah Reckon could find no other way to think of a person who spent his days wandering the public highways. A man who didn't work for a living and had no fixed address was a hobo, and that was all there was to it. Playing a fiddle for his meals and bed wasn't work.

She regretted the incident which placed Jimmie under obligation to the tramp. Apparently he had got into some kind of a scrape and the tramp had pulled him out of it. The letter wasn't very clear on the matter. It seemed Jimmie had disregarded a tip given him by a very tough individual just before his last fight. The tip had advised him it would be wiser to let himself be knocked out when he met a terrible creature known locally as the "Gila Monster." Disregarding the suggestion, Jimmie had knocked out the Gila Monster in the third round. Feeling resentment, several members of the betting fraternity waylaid Jimmie at midnight, as he was rattling away from the camp in his old car. Four to one, they gave him a bad mauling and left the victim unconscious in a ditch. There the tramp had found him. He had carried the boy to his camp, dressed his wounds and cared for him.

Evidently the tramp had been kindness itself during the three or four days it had taken his patient to get on his feet again. Then, nursing a black-eye, various bruises and a bad gash in his head, the two had started west in Jimmie's car, travelling slowly as befitted a semi-invalid. There was no doubt, she admitted, they owed the tramp a debt of gratitude, but she was loath to see it paid with board and lodging under her own roof.

Idly, she wondered how long the fellow would stay. Jimmie usually remained at home for two or three weeks. When he tired of hearing "no" from local managers and "yes" from Los Angeles girls, he borrowed fifty dollars from Sarah and steered the old car back to Arizona and New Mexico. If his attachment to the tramp was strong, as the letter suggested, she might have the hobo's company for the entire period of Jimmie's visit.

Apart from Jimmie, whom she had raised since he was three, no other man had polluted the interior of her house. At least, since the unexplained disappearance of Mr. Reckon twenty years ago. At that time the gentleman in question had borrowed fifty dollars and gone out, ostensibly to buy a new spring outfit. He had never returned.

The gate hinges were well oiled. She opened it without misgiving, the reward of careful forethought. Between the sidewalk and garden walls was a strip of grass. She always used it because it gave her noiseless passage. Seventy feet along the wall she

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approached the break where the Gordon gate opened. Habitual caution stopped her there, and she stood listening. There was no sound but the frog chorus with an underlying monotone of traffic from Washington. The gate was ajar. She stepped into the open space, glancing into the garden. Through the trees and shrubbery, she saw a faint light in the old-fashioned coloured glasses which framed the Gordon front door. As she turned to continue, the beam from an electric torch shone full in her eyes. She put out her hand and shrank back, an exclamation of annoyance on her lips. In the protection afforded by the outflung hand, she could see the small form of young "Face" Gordon behind the torch. She snapped at him, "Put that thing out!" Obligingly, he turned the torch downward, washing the sidewalk with white light.

"It's a prize for selling magazines," he said, and added proudly, "It focuses."

The white beam danced a hundred feet along the pavement and came back. Sarah remembered this was the night he got his supply of the weekly magazines he delivered to something over a hundred customers. She blamed herself for being stupid. If only she had waited another five minutes the boy would have been out of the street on his rounds, leaving her a clear hour. Now she would have to go back and start again.

"Sold twenty more magazines last week than usual," he explained, falling into step beside her as she retreated. She tried to keep the black basket concealed by her person, hoping he was too much engrossed in the torch and the heavy magazine bag to notice. He was a nice boy, she admitted, although he could be a bit inconvenient at times. Now, for instance. Sarah never had any serious trouble with him such as she had with other young pests who sometimes invaded the street. She liked his mother, too, a serious, hard-working person who minded her own business. The father wasn't much, but then, you didn't expect it of a man. At least, Sarah didn't, and was always a little incredulous when one of them turned out well. "Face" was one of the few who looked promising. Long ago, when the Gordons first came into the street and before people knew their name, they began calling the lad "the boy with the face," because he had such an engaging, infectious, freckled grin. Out of that grew the nickname "Face" Gordon. He babbled on now about his magazines, the money and the prizes he earned selling them.

"You learn a lot about people, Mrs. Reckon," he said. "Some folks'll cheat you for a nickel an' some'll go out of their way to see you get your money. An' you'd be surprised the way some'll only buy when they've looked through it to see if they like the cross-word puzzle. The magazine business is funny, just like folks."

Sarah Reckon ventured the information that her nephew was coming home. She thought it might keep his mind off the rather embarrassing question as to what she was doing creeping along the street with a basket. "Face" was pleased at the news.

"Jimmie always takes my magazine," he said. "Do you want it now, Mrs. Reckon?"

She took the copy he thrust at her and dropped it in the basket. "Come in tomorrow for the money," she said.

"I sure will, Mrs. Reckon. What time do you expect Jimmie?"

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Sarah Reckon wasn't certain. She thought it might be in the forenoon, some time. At her gate she paused. "Good night, 'Face'."

"Night, Mrs. Reckon. You haven't seen my dog around anywhere, have you?"

"I didn't know he was lost, 'Face'."

"Well, he ain't lost exactly, Mrs. Reckon. He just don't seem to be around for the last few days. He'll turn up sometime, I guess."

Whistling, he went down Poldrate. Sarah stood watching until he turned into Happen Street. Then she hurried up the path, making as much noise as possible on the decomposed granite. If anyone should be listening, she wanted her passage heard. On the front steps, she stamped her feet and when she dropped the magazine inside, slammed the door loudly. That, to any possible listener, indicated Sarah Reckon was in her house and about her own affairs. But, standing silent on the front porch, she felt herself once more secretive and unseen, a night creature. A little harried by time, perhaps.

"Face" would be back in an hour. There was no danger from him. Joseph Sleep's party, however, was another matter. One couldn't tell about such things in Poldrate Street. Sometimes they broke up early. Some slight unpleasantness and the guests departed, annoyed and dignified. It was now or never for the flowers. Using the wet grass, she hurried to her own front gate.

The moonlight on the brewery wall had moved up, leaving a broad band of shadow at the base. Sarah walked along the strip of sward. She knew just what she intended, for she had spied upon her neighbours' gardens during a casual afternoon stroll. She had noticed some unusually beautiful roses in Mafia Breene's place at the end of Poldrate. She intended to cut them first. Returning, she would gather Joseph Sleep's carnations. He had whole beds of red, white and cream blooms. After the carnations, she would help herself to French marigolds from the beds in Dr. Palling's garden.

The Palling gateway was massive as befitted the size of the mansion it guarded. There were no lights visible in the house whose bulk loomed blackly against the dimly luminous sky. The Pallings had no servants at the moment, she remembered, and both the Doctor and his wife were at Joseph Sleep's party.

Joseph Sleep's house stood farther back in its garden than the others. She did not expect to see any lights as she passed its gate, but she was a little surprised not to hear any sounds. They must be having one of their dignified nights. It hurried her steps, because, if the party was too stuffy, the guests might depart at any time.

Mafia Breene's roses grew over a tumble-down arbour constructed along the drive. They were very dark in colour, which made it difficult for Sarah to find them. In her haste, she neglected to pull on the dark gloves. After she had torn her hands several times on invisible thorns, she was forced to stop. She had just drawn the gloves into place and picked up her scissors when she heard the footsteps.

Men's footsteps, coming along Poldrate Street. Sarah had begun her clipping at the end of the arbour nearest the house, intending to work towards the gate. She stood

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motionless in the dark, hoping the steps would turn into one of the other gardens. But they were coming on. In fact, they must have been already past Joseph Sleep's gateway when she first heard them. Sarah realized, with a sense of uneasiness, they were coming straight on to the Breene gateway. In fact, she thought she recognized the little scraping sound of shoe leather with which Mafia Breene walked. There was no escape by the front path. She would have to go around by the side where she could wait in the heavy shadows until the men were gone.

They were almost at the gate, so there was no time to waste. She turned and ran, keeping to the tips of her toes with something of an effort, and hoping her passage on the gravel would not be heard. In her haste she passed the entrance to the side path, and almost stumbled over the front veranda steps before she realized her mistake. It was too late to go back, and progress around the side of the house was barred by a holly hedge. Sarah found herself on the veranda, cowering against the front door, hearing the steps drawing closer over the decomposed granite with appalling speed.

She was going to be caught, and that was all there was to it. She was invisible in the dark, but the steps were so close that a few more seconds must bring the men on to the veranda. She felt the door handle boring into her back and, at the last moment, in desperation, she reached behind, seized it, and turned. The door opened into the darkened hall.

Only a moment before, Sarah Reckon had been a poor creature, trembling in the dark. She was still in the dark, but she was no longer trembling. The change was due to the presence of a stout door between herself and discovery. With sure fingers, she pressed the catch on the Yale lock and slid into place a stout bolt. Her breath came a little unevenly as she leaned against the door frame, listening to the steps of the men on the veranda. But Sarah wasn't afraid any more. On the contrary, she felt clever again and mistress of the situation. She was safe in lingering a moment while Breene impatiently shook the handle and tried his key. She heard him swear and, mingled with his grumbling, the voice of his companion. She recognized it. Dr. Palling. Why, she wondered, had both of them run away from Joseph Sleep's party?

Sarah felt she had plenty of time. Breene couldn't get in while the bolt was shot. She was a little curious to know just what a man would do, thus mysteriously barred from his own house. She hadn't any intention of remaining too long, of course. But as long as her retreat along the hallway into the kitchen and through the kitchen door into the garden lay open, she felt quite confident. She was unprepared, therefore, to hear the scraping sound of a rusty wire overhead in the dark, followed by the harsh jangling of a bell somewhere in the depths of the house. Mafia Breene had yanked the old-fashioned bell-pull.

Sarah experienced a panicky feeling that once again she had blundered. Unaccustomed to the presence of servants in her own house, she had quite forgotten Cora Blessington, the ponderous Negress who was Breene's housekeeper. Even as she turned to make her escape, she realized she was cut off from the kitchen. Far down

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the dark hallway, she heard the heavy tread of the Negress and saw a glimmer of light as the servant's bedroom door was opened. To reach the kitchen, Sarah would have to pass that door, would, in fact, come face to face with the Negress herself. Behind her, she heard Breene give another savage yank at the rusty wire with its accompanying jangle of the kitchen bell. Cora's voice, hoarse and petulant, was heard shouting in her bedroom. "I'se coming, Mistuh Breene. I'se coming." Sarah realized the Negress had thrown open the door and then, fortunately, gone back for a dressing-gown. Desperately, she looked about for a hiding-place.

The opening of Cora's bedroom door, although far down the hall, permitted some light to reach the place where Sarah stood. She saw the entrance to a little sitting-room in the opposite wall. Without hesitation, she crossed, hoping to conceal herself until a chance for escape presented itself. It was dark in there, and she hesitated, afraid to move lest she stumble against a piece of furniture. She was beginning to tremble again. In all her nocturnal excursions, this was the first time she had ever been so clumsy.

She heard Cora coming down the hall. Then there was the click of a light switch and a dim light shone inside a pendant lantern. Sarah saw a screen behind a couch. By the time Cora reached the front door. Sarah was crouched behind the screen. Once again she felt safe. Surely, she thought, no one will think to pull the couch aside.

Breene's voice was audible, finding fault with Cora for bolting the door. Cora's voice, heavy like a man's, denied that she had even been near the door since Breene went out. "I'se been with Him, Mistuh Breene. I ain't never been away from Him." That would be her invalid boy she's talking about, Sarah thought. The poor creature that never gets out of bed and can't even talk. Breene petulantly demanded to know how the devil the bolt got into place if Cora hadn't put it there. Palling interrupted the argument brusquely.

"Come along, Breene. We've got to get back to Sleep's, you know."

The two men came into the room where Sarah crouched, and closed the door. There was the click of a switch as the lights came on. She heard a key turned, and wondered why they were locking themselves in.

"You're a fool, Breene, leaving this door unlocked. That Negress will get on to us if you're not careful. The smell is enough to knock you down."

It wasn't dust she had been smelling, Sarah noticed. More like an animal. She realized it was dog. For some reason, that made her remember "Face" Gordon's missing pet. She heard another door unlocked and the men go through into a second room. There was a rumble of words which she couldn't quite make out. All she cared for now was to get away, and that appeared quite easy. She had only to remain where she was until the men took their departure.

It was just then she heard something which roused her curiosity. Palling's voice, lifted a little in excitement, spoke plainly. "Perfect, Mafia," he said. "Substitute Kitty for the dog and we've got something, my friend. We have, indeed."

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Breene answered, but his voice was muffled. Sarah sat on her heels, wondering what on earth they meant by substituting Kitty for the dog. Kitty? That was the name of the red-headed girl who had come to live with Joseph Sleep. How very odd, she thought. Her curiosity, held in check by danger, now asserted itself when she believed herself safe. Cautiously, she raised her head and peered over the back of the couch.

The door into the other room stood ajar. The two men bent over a small wheeled table examining something illuminated by a shaded overhead light. Sarah realized it was "Face" Gordon's dog they had stretched out on the table, apparently unconscious. A curious tangle of rubber pipes dropped from the animal into the shadows below the table. She saw Dr. Palling lift the dog's right paw and drop it. The limb fell lifelessly.

"Perfect," Palling said. "Simply perfect."

Breene grumbled. "I wish I was sure as you seem to be."

At that moment Sarah felt the screen going. In her eagerness to see, she had pressed against it. Frantically, she tried to stop its fall, but succeeded only in sending it crashing to the floor. The two men in the next room whirled. She saw their mouths fall open and was conscious that, whereas Palling was angry, Breene's face betrayed absolute terror. She shoved the couch aside and plunged towards the door. Even as she ran, she remembered with a feeling of hopeless panic that it was locked.

CHAPTER TWO

IT WAS A WARM NIGHT, but Joseph Sleep was cold inside his white shirt and black dinner-coat. He was always cold inside, even on the hottest day, for his blood count was below normal and the years had not been kind to him. He was no full-blooded, well-fed jolly man, but a thin, acidulous person suffering from a ruined digestion, ruined ambition, ruined hopes and the ever-sharpening certainty that soon, very soon, he must go the way of all men. Of late, Mafia Breene had taken to looking at him appraisingly when they met, or so it seemed to Sleep's imagination. Breene and Palling together, he thought, they were always looking at him in that odd way. They hoped he would go. He knew that because things would be easier for both of them with him out of the way. It wasn't only the money they owed him. Not that it was very much, really. Only five hundred each, but with the interest, which was unpaid, it mounted up. He knew it weighed upon them because they had other bills.

No, it wasn't only the money. At least, not in Palling's case. There were things he knew about another life Palling had lived before he came to Poldrate Street. The fellow didn't earn much, five or six thousand perhaps. But, such as it was, he worked for it, and it kept him going with that wife of his, Violet. He looked across the room. She was sitting against the high, old-fashioned windows with the dingy curtains. The

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long lines of her, a trifle too long perhaps, but the effect of those slender limbs outlined under the flimsy mauve evening dress was provocative.

He remembered a time when the provocation would have set him hunting her, or any women who moved with such limbs inside a rustle of silk. It must be sheer silk stockings which made the sexy whisper under her dress, stockings which were drawn high over the rounded knees. He strained his ears to hear it, but although it was quite audible, he no longer experienced anything. It was years too late. He was too old. She knew it, he realized with bitterness. Perhaps that was why she didn't take any trouble to disguise from him her boredom with her husband, her sulky desire to betray him, if she could do it secretly.

Joseph Sleep shifted his position slightly, turning over in his mind the thought that he could ruin Palling if he wanted to, cut off that paltry six thousand by whispering a few words to the California Medical Association. The woman, too. He knew her secret. Perhaps one day, before it was too late, he would tell what he knew about both of them.

A movement across the room caught his eye. Violet shifted slightly, crossing and uncrossing her legs. He suddenly remembered this was supposed to be a party. Not the kind which people gave nowadays, all gin and noise. He had wanted it to be the dignified kind he remembered a long, long time ago, where men were gentlemen and the women always ladies. He thought now, with a slightly cynical twist of his thin lips, that it may have been because they were afraid to be anything else. But it had been pleasant.

Sleep glanced down at the unlighted cigar between his thin, bloodless fingers. Its brown leaf wrapper was scarcely darker than the tanned skin. So much of his time was spent in the garden, under the hot sun. Heat was a fetish with him, the desire to warm that glacial something which pervaded his body, even on the hottest days. He never quite succeeded. There was only one bit of warmth in him, a tiny spot of comfort which glowed always in his mind. It had come into being a year ago when he had opened the letter from the east, telling him about Kitty McKay and her money and the guardianship which would be his when her grandmother died. The old lady had died so soon afterwards that it seemed she had only waited to get the letter off to him before she did it. The letter had told him all about Kitty, then scarcely nineteen, and the money which was to be hers when she came to the age of twenty-two. It was only about a hundred thousand in property and government bonds. But it seemed a great deal to Joseph Sleep, who had managed to save little more than a third of that after a life-time of scheming and contriving. It represented wealth to him, a fortune in the almost mythical six figures.

Mrs. McKay must have been rather a simple woman, he thought, to entrust a young girl and so much money to the management of a man she hardly knew. It was fifty years since Joseph Sleep and Nina McKay, then Nina Carson, had gone together in the little Vermont town where they had grown from childhood. But the good

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name he had inherited from his forebears had lingered on in the land where all but Joseph had laid their bones for ever. He thought complacently of the reputation for probity and uprightness they had created, and which could survive half a century of absence and follow him to this distant land of California where he had lived so long. It proved, he was sure, there was nothing dishonourable about him still, just as there had been nothing underhand about the coltish Joseph Sleep of fifty years ago. It was because of his reputation that Nina McKay had written him after all these years with the request that he assume responsibility for Kitty and her money. It was not until he read the letter to its very end that the little spot of warmth came into Joseph Sleep's mind. In almost its last line, Nina had said Kitty knew nothing about the money which would one day come to her.

Then had followed a postscript. Joseph despised postscripts as a rule. They indicated, he thought, a scatterbrain inability to get at the meat of a letter without afterthought. But he read and re-read this one and gloated over it. Nina had said Kitty knew nothing about her fortune. She had been brought up as a simple country girl, well-trained, of course, as befitted a gentlewoman, but ignorant of money and its responsibilities. Nina believed it better that she come to woman's estate without false ideas of her own importance. In Joseph's hands she placed the task of letting her know over a period of time, and, as he saw fit, that she was a wealthy woman. She begged him to guard against the approaches of men who might be interested in the money rather than in the girl herself. Almost timidly, it seemed, she suggested Joseph conceal the knowledge of her wealth until Kitty had become engaged to a worthy man.

There had been a great deal of the postscript. In fact it was longer than the letter itself, as if the poor woman had been so agitated in writing the letter as to have forgotten most of what she intended to say and only recovered her wits when she had signed her name. There was a long passage about their childhood, and about the little stone church with its basement Sundayschool where they had studied the Bible together. Apparently it did not occur to Nina that anyone, brought up as they had been, could wander very far from the path indicated by those early teachings. She was sure Joseph hadn't. He nodded when he read that part. He was quite sure she was right and that he could still go back to that little Sundayschool and take his place on the worn maple benches with the same simple peace of mind. Joseph did not know that a high speed motor-road now ran over the site of the long-vanished church. The change bore some resemblance to what had happened to his simplicity. Church site and simplicity were still there. What went on over them was quite a different matter. But Nina, faced with the conviction of approaching death, had reached out to her girlhood friend with the gifts of grand-daughter and money, secure in the trust of her own simplicity. There was no one else, she explained, in whom she had the same confidence.

Like the letter, the postscript had a last line which almost lifted Joseph Sleep out of his chair. Knowing the uncertainty of human existence, Nina had taken care of

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another possibility although admitting its improbability. In the event of Kitty's death, without issue, said this extraordinary last line, the money was to go to Joseph Sleep.

The little spot of warmth in Sleep's mind glowed and waxed. Not that he contemplated for a moment the possibility of death for Kitty. She was young and vigorous. He was old and almost ready to finish his account. But before he did so, he was to have the joy of handling all that money, to manipulate as he desired, as if it were his very own. Joseph Sleep, the man who could write his cheque in six figures. It had a grand sound. He recalled the talk around the old upright iron stove in the general store of that Vermont town about such characters, men "who could write a cheque in six figures." And now he was to be one of them. He wouldn't ever write such a cheque, of course. The money wasn't actually his, but he had the handling of it which was almost the same thing.

And so the time had come, sooner than he hoped, when news came of Nina's death. He had immediately written Kitty, suggesting she come to live with him. It seemed only right and proper, he wrote, that her guardian give her a home. Under his own roof it would be easier to maintain the fiction that she was practically without resources. He had even sent the train money for her trip. By virtue of his office as sole executor, he had arranged for the forwarding of rents and the transfer of bonds. He could still feel the physical reaction he had experienced when the huge bundle of registered mail arrived and he had gone down to place the papers in his own deposit box. He was so engrossed in the joy of handling such sums of money he had almost forgotten the girl. A telegram, sent from Kansas City, told him she was coming, that she was actually on the way. He realized with a shock that he was going to see her in a few hours, that he must be on hand to greet her when the train arrived at the Santa Fe station.

Until that moment he had not even bothered to tell his housekeeper about the girl. The arrangements had been made in a great hurry. He felt a faint distaste, even now, remembering the scene when he told Fanny Smallbone. She had been with him for years, an ageless automaton, almost stone deaf. For some reason, he had shrunk from the task and put it off until the very moment he was leaving the house. Then he tried to tell her without raising his voice, without giving her a chance to read his lips, as if ashamed of something. The realization of his childishness followed. He turned to face Fanny and tell her about the girl. Evidently, for once, she mistrusted her skill at lip-reading, so astounding had she found the news. She stared at him unbelievingly. He had been forced to shout so that her ears could hear, and the words, echoing through the old house, had seemed indecent. The fact that he, Joseph Sleep, was bringing a young girl to live with him. He remembered the instant suspicion which had come into Fanny's faded eyes. He was surprised to find how many words it took to explain, how long he had to talk before something of the sharp disapproval went out of her face.

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He shouted "guardian" over and over again, and that the girl must have the side room, overlooking the garden. Then he had hastily pointed to his watch, shouted "train" and hurried out the front door, shaken and a little unnerved.

He remembered the time he had stood at the station barrier, scanning the crowds as they came up the ramp. He had no means of recognizing the girl since he had never seen a picture. So he had stood pressed against the iron railings, staring at the first stragglers and then at the swiftly moving crowd, wondering what to do. It was not until the gates were closed again and the place almost cleared that he saw her, a solitary figure behind a modest plinth of baggage, on the far side of the waiting-room. He had plenty of opportunity to study her as he crossed slowly. The appearance of the girl, her air of complete assurance and sophistication, surprised him, somewhat. It was not exactly what he had expected from a small Vermont town.

He was able to approach within a few feet before she noticed him. Then she looked quickly, inquiry in her eyes. She was tall, he saw, taller than himself. She had red hair and the clear skin with the faint over-tone of tawny down which went with the natural colouring. Her eyes were a golden brown and the light in them was hot and provoking. Joseph Sleep had been interested in women once. He knew instantly that Kitty McKay was one of those who would always be a torment and a heartache in the lives of men. Even before she spoke in the rich, unexpected viola voice, he knew it and blessed the years which had rendered him immune.

"You're Mr. Sleep, aren't you?" she asked and smiled. He was a little bewildered at finding himself talking to a red-headed girl on such an unusual basis.

"Stay here while I get a red-cap," he said, and the girl nodded. He returned presently with the porter who gathered her things and followed them out to the ranks of taxi-cabs. Once in the cab, the girl had slewed partly round to look at him. The movement brought one knee against his leg. He felt the firm, velvet curve through the thin stuff of her dress and his trouser. "So you're my guardian," she said. "It's very nice of you to have me. I think I'm going to like California."

Without looking at her, he had answered. "I hope so, Kitty. My house is big enough, but it's rather old-fashioned." She had laughed a little. "That won't matter, Mr. Sleep. My house at home was old-fashioned, too. I like space."

At that moment they passed one of the strange monstrosities with which Iowan architects have tortured Spanish design. Kitty cried out in amazement, her hand still clasping his. It was several seconds before she became aware of the contact. During that interval he had continued to look down at the young, vital hand closed over his own withered one. Once, a long time ago, he would have lifted it to his lips. He remembered now, that long after they arrived at the house in Poldrate Street, the perfume of that clasp lingered about his hand.

It was here in the room now, he realized, the old-fashioned lilies-of-the-valley perfume which she always carried about with her. He looked across the drawing-room at the girl. A queer kind of a party, this, he thought, where nobody talked, only sat

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about in a dim and faded elegance, waiting for the time to go home. The men, apparently, had already done so. Where the devil had Palling and Breene got to, anyhow? They had said they were going to see if there had been any business calls for them. He had thought it an odd excuse. Calls could have been relayed by telephone. At least from Breene's house. Cora Blessington could have done that. He remembered that the Palling household was again without a maid. The last had left yesterday, the second in three months. What the deuce was wrong with that Palling woman, anyhow, that she couldn't keep a servant?

Violet hadn't moved since that restless recrossing of the silken knees. She was looking at something. Her eyes were fixed on some object across the room, and from the angle of her head it must be Kitty. Kitty, he thought sardonically, seemed to be asleep. Perhaps he should do something to liven things up a bit.

"Kitty," he said abruptly. The girl opened her eyes and turned. "Would you play something for us, my dear?"

The music, when it came, was thin and scattered. He had never heard it before. The notes seemed to linger in the shadows.

He wished he could see Violet better. He had never realized before how badly the room was lighted. Or perhaps it was his sight which had grown poorer. He was startled to hear Fanny Smallbone saying loudly that supper was ready and would they please come. The woman always spoke much louder than was necessary.

Kitty stopped playing and came around from behind the huge square piano. He was just about to hold out his arm when he noticed the Palling woman. She hadn't stirred. "Come along, Violet," he said. "I've an arm for both of you." She rose then, soundlessly and without effort, her long limbs smooth and swift. He felt Kitty's fingers on his black sleeve and sensed the lilies-of-the-valley perfume while they waited.

Then the fragrance was lost and confused in the sudden, overpowering carnation which accompanied the Palling woman. Between them, one tall and fair, with red hair, and one tall and dark, with heavy masses of raven hair, he walked into the hall. Two tall, slender, passionate women. Thin women were faithless women, he thought. They could have torn him to pieces. Perhaps if he weren't careful they would. What the devil put such thoughts into his head, anyway? Kitty was his ward. She wouldn't do any tearing. Not while she thought herself dependent. He'd take care she thought so for a long time. As for the Palling woman, her husband could take care of her.

What had become of the fellow, anyhow? Here it was after eleven and he was feeling sleepy. He wanted to get this supper over and get them out of his house. "Fanny," he said loudly, "telephone Dr. Palling and Mr. Breene. Tell 'em we're waiting."

Fanny was bending over the long table in the dining-room, lighting candles in the candelabra.

The table was set with a cold supper of salads and meats. Fanny always did this sort of thing very well when she got a chance at it, which wasn't often. He found

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himself drawing back a chair. "Will you sit here, Violet? Kitty, my dear, take the foot of the table. You're the mistress, you know."

The girl moved slowly to the place indicated, her hair a dull bronze glow in the candle-light. He wished someone would say something. But no one spoke.

What was that Palling woman staring at Kitty for? He wished he hadn't asked her, hadn't asked her husband, hadn't asked Breene. Where the devil were they, anyway? "Fanny," he said loudly, "I told you to telephone —"

Fanny interrupted in the toneless, high-pitched voice which always made him think of a radio. "They're coming now." She was over by the sideboard, lighting the last of the candles. As she picked up the candelabra and came forward, Palling and Breene came into the room. Palling was first. He noticed the fellow looked quickly at his wife and seemed relieved when she paid no attention. "Sorry to be so long," he said. "There was a call."

He came forward in Fanny's wake. Joseph Sleep noticed little sparks of light on his shoes and trousers. There was the same sparkle around the bottoms of Breene's legs. "You're wet," he said crossly. "Is it raining?" Palling semed startled as he followed the direction of Sleep's gaze. He shook his head and dropped into a seat. "No," he said. "We — we crossed the lawn. I suppose Gordon's been watering."

Sleep grunted. "Humph, that fellow. He never does anything he doesn't have to. He'd lean on the shovel 'til the handle rotted." Palling was opening a bottle of beer. Sleep asked him a question. "What took so long, Palling?"

Palling's hand shook so that a few drops spilled on the cloth. "There was a call," he said. "Breene waited while I took care of it."

Sleep was surprised. "You mean you went to see a patient?" Palling hesitated:

"No. Not exactly. I called on the telephone."

For the first time Violet Palling looked at him. "Who was it, Ivar?"

Sleep saw Palling's face twitch. Something seemed to pass between him and his wife, he couldn't see what it was. He wished there was more light. Damn his eyes, anyhow. "Fanny, more candles. Quick, do you hear?"

The Palling woman was still looking at her husband, but he wasn't paying any attention. "I walked around to the drugstore," he said. "Got the prescription myself. That took time."

Breene looked at him over his glass and seemed about to say something. Mrs. Palling cut in: "Ivar, I asked you who it was?"

Palling drank some of his beer. "Oh, a woman," he said. "Over on Eighteenth Street. Heart. I sent something with digitalis. See her tomorrow on my rounds."

Violet Palling was looking at her husband with a curious, intent stare.

"I didn't know you had a patient on Eighteenth Street," she said.

Palling went on spreading apple butter on a piece of bread.

"Neither did I," he answered carelessly. "She just called around and left her name."

Curious, Sleep thought. Very curious, indeed. "How could she call when you

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haven't any servant?" he asked. "You haven't, have you?"

Palling looked at him out of his narrow eyes. In the bright light of additional candles which Fanny had gone on lighting, Sleep thought the fellow looked positively vicious. He wondered what the mouth was like hidden under the shadow of the neat little Vandyke beard. If he hadn't known what he did about Palling, he might have felt afraid of him. But, knowing that, there was no reason to fear.

"She didn't call on the telephone," Palling said. "There was a note stuck in the front door. People do that, you know, when they're taken suddenly. If they haven't got a regular man, they hunt up the nearest medico in the telephone book." He glanced at Breene. Sleep thought there was something appealing, almost furtive in the way he did it. Breene held out his glass to Fanny. "If you don't mind," he said. "You're making it so hot here with all those candles, I've got to have something more to drink."

Sleep suddenly felt very hot himself. There was moisture running down his forehead. The silly woman had gone on lighting candles until there were dozens. The room was positively unbearable. He felt faint and got up a little shakily. "Excuse me," he said, and walked towards the hall. He heard chairs being pushed back behind him, and then a hand steadied his arm. It was Kitty, smiling and looking concerned. "I'll take you into the library," she said. Nice of the girl. No one had ever done anything really kind to him, not in many years. He glanced back. The others were all watching. "Tell that woman to put out some of those candles," he said. Kitty guided him across the hall. He heard Palling's voice. "Maybe I'd better help." "Stay where you are," he said loudly. At least he thought he said it loudly, but it sounded only a whisper in his ears. Somehow he was lying on the leather couch in the library with the cool feel of it coming through his thin dinner clothes. Kitty was bending over him. He could see the bronze halo around her head.

Palling was there, too. He seemed to be doing something with his tie and collar.

His collar was open now and he seemed to be able to breathe easier. Confound it, he mustn't lie here. He ought to be in the dining-room with the others. They'd be guzzling more of his port than he intended. He tried to rise, but Palling's hand pressed against his shoulder. "Lie still, Joseph. You'll be better here for a while."

He made no further attempt to rise. He was feeling better now, more aware of what was going on. But there was no point in letting Palling know. Maybe if he played 'possum for a bit he'd find out something. This fainting spell should be a warning to him, he thought. It would never do to have a seizure and have Fanny call the nearest medico, as Palling said people usually did. Palling was the nearest, of course, and he'd be a fool to let him have the chance of messing about if he was really seriously ill. Very nice for Breene and Palling if he, Joseph Sleep, died suddenly in an attack like this. Palling could issue the death certificate. Breene would handle the burial service. Neat, damned neat. Sleep shivered a little at the neatness of it.

"He's cold," he heard Kitty say. "I'll get a cover."

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"That's right," Palling said. "Fetch something warm." He was fumbling in his pocket. Sleep experienced a momentary sense of terror. "Don't leave me, Kitty." He was sure he spoke loudly this time. His voice sounded strong even to his own ears. He was up on one elbow, holding out his hand to Kitty. He wasn't going to be left alone with Palling, not if he knew it. "I'm all right. I'm not a bit cold." Kitty stopped and came back. Palling tried to shove him back on the pillow but he wasn't having any of it. "Take your hands off me, Palling. Do you hear?" The doctor's big hands seemed all over him, shoving him back. "There, there. Just lie down and rest — " Sleep pushed him aside and sat up. "Be damned to you, Palling. What have you done with my tie?"

Kitty held it out. "Here it is. Let me help you." While she put it in place, he looked at Palling maliciously. The doctor returned his glance sulkily. "Thought you had me that time, didn't you, Palling? Well, you didn't and you're not going to, either. Thanks, Kitty, my dear. Now let's be getting back to the others."

He got briskly to his feet, feeling quite all right. Kitty held out her arm to steady him, but he took it instead and laid it gallantly on his own. Then, with a bow to Palling, he led the way from the library.

In the hall he stopped and looked back. Palling hadn't stirred, and Sleep felt a sudden coldness around his heart. The fellow was looking at his desk and, it seemed, at one particular drawer. Locked though it was, there was a secret in that drawer which didn't seem any too safe, not with Palling's eyes on the woodwork. Nina's letter was there and some other papers which told far too much about Kitty and her money and his own relationship to both. "Palling," he said sharply. The doctor seemed to come to himself with a start and followed swiftly into the hall. It was impossible, of course, that he could know anything about Kitty and the money, but it was odd that he should look at that particular drawer and appear to go into a trance about it. "Suppose you take Kitty's other arm, Palling." Damn it, he'd share an arm with the fellow, but nothing else. And tomorrow — no tonight — before he went to bed, he'd take those papers out of that drawer. Tomorrow they'd go into his safety-deposit box.

Kitty leaned closer. "Are you sure you're all right, dear?" He found her eyes rather disturbing, even at his age. "You really ought to go to bed, Joseph." That was Palling on the other side. Blast the fellow's impudence, calling him Joseph.

"When my guests are gone, *Doctor* Palling." He hoped the emphasis would make his meaning clear. They were at the dining-room door now. The others looked up. It was just as he had feared. The port decanter was in the act of crossing the table from Breene to Mrs. Palling. "Hello," Breene said in a thick voice. He looked at Sleep with blood-shot eyes. "Feeling all right now?" As he spoke he fumbled for his glass, knocked it over and spilled a dark red petal across the cloth. "That's too bad," he mumbled. "We were jus' having some of your port. Very good port. Very good."

Sleep handed Kitty to her chair. Then he answered Breene. "Thanks," he said. "I feel much better now. Sorry to have left you. Fanny, bring another bottle of port.

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The decanter seems to be empty."

Fanny shuffled forward to take the decanter. "It was full a few minutes ago," she grumbled. Sleep nodded, looking at Breene. "Yes, I know," he said. "And now Mr. Breene is full. Very full. Nevertheless, bring another bottle." He gave the order loudly, confident it would never be carried out.

CHAPTER THREE

"FACE" GORDON was in no particular hurry about going home.

With his magazines, he covered a wide range of streets. Silently he entered garden after garden, slipping copies under doorways or into letter boxes where his customers would find them. The new torch was a joy. With its white beam poking into dark corners he broke up more than one tender scene. If his departure was a trifle hurried at such moments, accompanied by threats and abuse, he took comfort from the fact that he had added to his store of knowledge concerning the habits of men and women.

"Face" was at the age when he was extremely curious about a great many things, not the least of which was life. A solitary, with no friends, he had discovered an exciting pastime which could be enjoyed at its best during these nocturnal deliveries. To be frank about it, "Face" Gordon was a Peeping Tom. Silent in his black tennis shoes, he discovered dozens of windows where the curtains were carelessly drawn. Experience and long familiarity with his route had taught him the retiring hours of dozens of citizens and citizenesses, who had no idea, as they disrobed, that a pair of very curious eyes watched their every move.

Tonight's entertainments, he felt, were not up to the usual standard. True, he witnessed a violent quarrel between Mr. and Mrs. Schwartz, who occupied lower floor, seven, in the Abigail apartments. He was charmed when the gentler member of the act neatly retired her husband from the conflict with a well-aimed hairbrush. In the next street he was a delighted witness when that Fryer woman, entertaining a strange male in her bedroom, was thrown into a frenzy of back-pedalling by the unexpected return of Mr. Fryer. From his vantage point outside the bedroom window, "Face" heard her lord's somewhat unsteady feet coming along the pavement in sufficient time to beat a safe retreat into the bushes. He lingered to see the trespassing stag come hurriedly through the window and make his way to the street. There the stranger paused in the shadows.

"Face" considerately waited until some very necessary adjustments had been completed before advancing silently.

"Paper, mister?"

The startled Lothario gave a convulsive leap, almost losing the garment so recently drawn into place. "Where in blazes — ? No, I don't want no paper. Beat it."

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"Maybe you'd better buy a couple," "Face" suggested amiably. "Mr. Fryer will be home the rest of the night so you can't go back. You'll want something to read."

He deftly avoided an angry hand and explored the man's face with a beam of light. "Ten cents, mister, for two," he said implacably. "Mr. Fryer might like to hear about this."

Pawing at the tormenting ray of light, the gentleman almost lost his precarious hold upon the nether garment. There was a sound of coins jingling. "Your money's in your pants pocket, mister. Twenty cents'll keep your secret."

"I heard you the first time, kid. Here."

"Face" shone the torch on the outstretched hand. A solitary dime gleamed. The blackmailer shook his head, backing away. "Not a chance," he said. "You're getting off easy. Mr. Fryer — "

His tones had risen, rousing fresh fears in the breast of the victim, who glanced anxiously towards the apartment he had recently vacated. Mr. Fryer's voice was audible, raised in song. "Face" found a quarter thrust into his hand. "Thanks," he said. "Here's your five papers." The man glared into the torch light. "You know what you can do with them," he snarled and hastily walked away. "Thanks," "Face" called. "That's clear profit."

He mentally estimated the amount as he trudged towards Washington Street. It would be worth keeping an eye on the Fryer apartment, he decided. Next time, if there should be one, he'd raise the price to a dollar. Maybe he'd been soft, letting the fellow off with a mere two-bits. He admitted, however, that he had a sneaking admiration for the man's enterprise. In fact, he felt a little envious.

On the whole, he decided he was not disappointed with the night, although he preferred younger subjects for his Peeping Tom activities. Something more artistic. Poses by virginal solitude, as it were. However, he had reserved a final bit of peeping which he hoped would top the evening with something really worth while. It had to do with a certain bedroom window in the residence of Mr. Joseph Sleep.

During the previous afternoon, while ostensibly engaged in studying the habits of a pair of house-finches, he had spotted the room where Kitty was quartered. With all the care of an explorer preparing for an attack upon Mount Everest, he had surveyed the limbs of a fine sycamore tree in Mr. Sleep's garden. It would be practically without risk, he was sure, since Fanny Smallbone was deaf. Sleep's room was on the opposite side, and Kitty, a newcomer, would suspect nothing.

He glanced at the big clock over the mortuary chapel he was passing. The Sleep party would disperse soon, he thought. In about a quarter of an hour the unsuspecting red-head would provide the ecstatic "Face" with the entertainment for which his soul craved.

Outside Mafia Breene's establishment he paused for a moment, studying the stone front and leaded window-panes of the little chapel. On one side was a neatly gravelled parking lot. His father picked up a few dollars there each week, watching the p

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cars of mourners. At this time of the night the little chapel and the embalming quarters behind were in darkness. Only through the high window at the side of the chapel came a faint glow in the blue and orange glass around the head of the Redeemer.

He turned into Happen Street, leaving the late traffic of Washington behind. A short distance along Happen he came to the entrance of a lane which ran between the gardens of the houses in Poldrate Street and the rear of stores on Washington. At this time of the night the shops were closed. The lane itself was black, and viewless. "Face" hesitated at the mouth of that tunnel, considering the advisability of entering the Sleep garden by way of the alley gate. The gate, of course, would be locked, and he remembered in time that Joseph Sleep had broken glass imbedded in cement along the top of his garden wall. The Palling wall alongside was free of such evidence of distrust, but there were flower-beds below the wall. "Face" desired to leave behind no incriminating footprints. So he decided to go down Poldrate Street and enter the Sleep garden by way of the front gate.

Passing alongside Mrs. Reckon's garden wall, he paused for a quick look both ways along Happen Street. There was no one in sight. He thrust his hand into the ivy clinging to the wall. The groping fingers found the lower foot-hold of a ladder he had made by removing bricks at suitable intervals. There was a faint rustle from the leaves as he shinned to the top and peered at the Reckon house. The windows were dark. That satisfied him Sarah Reckon had completed her raid and was safe in bed. Descending, he grinned at the ridiculous old woman thinking her depredations were secret. Many a time he had watched her come and go, himself a silent shadow. Funny the way the old girl tried to pretend tonight she was merely out for a little walk. It had amused him, forcing her to go home and start all over again. Of course he had seen the basket and understood its purpose. He had even heard the faint clink of the scissors. He was probably the only one in the street who was onto her raids. Not that they mattered very much. There were lots of flowers. As one nocturnal prowler to another, he wished her success. He was cleverer, of course. No one ever saw *him*. Of that he was certain.

He was reasonably sure now that Sarah Reckon had completed her raid and was safe at home for the night. He checked that assurance when he turned into Poldrate Street by studying the front of the Reckon house from the shelter of the street wall. By all the signs Sarah Reckon was between the sheets. He hurried along to his own gate where he placed his magazine bag and the evening's take under a shrub.

At the Palling gateway, he slipped inside, creeping along the path until he could see the house through the shrubbery. There was a vague light in one of the upstairs rooms. He knew that was the Pallings' bedroom. Undoubtedly, they would be in that room and in the act of retiring.

From his position on the Palling path he tried to see over their garden wall in the direction of Sleep's house but the trees baffled him. Suddenly apprehensive lest he be late, "Face" hurried back to the street. Just as he emerged from the Palling gate and

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was crossing the strip of grass between wall and sidewalk, his foot struck something which tinkled. He located the object again with his toe and picked it up. Scissors, he thought, and immediately remembered the pair he had heard in Mrs. Reckons' basket.

He stepped closer to the wall, feeling the steel with questioning fingers. No rust, so they hadn't been long in the grass. He wondered how a pair of scissors could have been dropped in such a place. Certainly they hadn't been there during the day. He had passed that way too many times to have missed them. Could Mrs. Reckon have dropped them after he left her?

Crouching against the wall, he used his coat for a tent and risked a quick flash of the torch. They were hers, right enough. No mistake about that. The blades were stained with juice from the stalks of plants. For a space, he pondered. She must have dropped them as she hurried home after her raid, although it was very unlike her to do such a thing. He shrugged his shoulders. Time was passing. If he wanted to see anything he'd better be getting on. The vital moment in Kitty's evening would soon be irretrievably past.

As he turned, another thought floated into his mind like a bright, attractive butterfly. Why not return the scissors to their owner himself and in a way peculiarly his own? Suppose he placed them against Mrs. Reckon's kitchen door at such an angle that they would clatter on the floor when she emerged in the morning? She would never know who had left them there, but the mere fact of their return in such a way would tell her someone knew about the flower raids. That would take the starch out of her, he thought. If he hurried, he might still be in time for Kitty's big moment.

"Face" knew his way through the Reckon garden, even with his eyes shut. The grass was wet, he noticed. He could feel the dampness through the canvas of his shoes.

The kitchen windows, as he expected, were dark, just as they had been when he looked over the garden wall. He stood perfectly still, ears alert. Only the distant murmur of traffic in Washington Street came to him. He went forward to the steps leading up to the little veranda before the kitchen door. There were boards which creaked on the left so he kept well away from them. He paused for a moment to polish his finger-prints from the scissors. Holding the scissors with his handkerchief, he bent forward, preparing to balance their points on the sill. In the act he paused, staring. Even in the dim light under the veranda he could see the door was ajar. Possibly Mrs. Reckon had forgotten to close it when she went to bed.

He pressed his fingers against the door, shoving it wider. The smell of the kitchen came out to meet him, a strange dank mixture of cooking pots and soap. "Face" was mentally improving upon his first plan for leaving the scissors. It might be more of a shock to Mrs. Reckon's complacency, he thought, if she found them lying on the kitchen table. He decided to risk a quick glimpse with the torch. Holding it flat against his middle, he pressed the button.

Never in all his life would "Face" Gordon forgot the shock which followed. Seated

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in a kitchen rocking-chair, staring directly at him, was Mrs. Sarah Reckon!

In the enveloping darkness which followed that awful sight, "Face" Gordon turned to flee. He had taken two cat-like leaps across the porch when he stopped as suddenly as he had started. Behind him the silence was unbroken. At any moment he expected to see the form of Mrs. Reckon advance upon him out of the darkness. But there was nothing, nothing at all. Why didn't she move?

In a kind of heroic terror which was yet inferior to curiosity, he held out the torch like a gun and squeezed the button. Once again, in the lemon-yellow glow, he saw the form of Mrs. Reckon. He kept his finger on the button, advancing step by step. The woman didn't move. She kept her hands folded in her lap and her eyes glittered in the light. At the door, a paralysis of fear stopped him. His frightened eyes took in every detail of the woman's posture, the fixed immobility, the glassy stare. "Face" Gordon knew now why Mrs. Reckon had not challenged his intrusion. She did not see his light, would never see anything again. "You're dead, ain't you?" he inquired politely. The sound of his own voice frightened him more than the thing on the chair. With a sudden gulp, he turned, leaped from the porch and fled.

CHAPTER FOUR

DR. IVAR PALLING was waiting for a case. Unlike most physicians in similar circumstances, he knew exactly what that case would be. It would be very unfortunate indeed if he didn't, he thought grimly. As a preliminary he waited for the front door-bell to ring.

Lingering over his third cup of coffee and re-reading the morning paper, he was conscious of the furtive questioning in Violet's eyes. It was after nine, and by this time he should have left the house to begin his unexacting round of calls. He wondered if it mightn't have been wiser to go as usual. He could have found some pretext for returning almost immediately. But it was too late for that now. It would never do to be absent and risk the chance of another doctor being brought into the thing. Not that there was much likelihood of a stranger noticing anything. There was nothing to see, really. He was quite sure no one would ever find the almost microscopic spot hidden under the hair above Sarah Reckon's right temple. And even if they did, there would be nothing in the blood stream after the passage of so many hours.

Certain as he was, he felt it would be the height of folly to take the slightest chance. He was ready, when called, to make the usual examination and issue the usual certificate. Mafia Breene would take care of the funeral arrangements. Very convenient, he thought, having Breene in the same street and so completely amenable. That is, after a little persuasion. Dr. Palling frowned at the memory. Breene had been a

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little difficult last night. In the brief time at his disposal after — after it had happened — it had taken a torrent of words and the full force of his personality to persuade the fellow. But he had come around. After all they had gone through in planning the coup which was to make them rich, the unwarranted intrusion of a wretched female wasn't going to stop them. Anyway, not Ivar Palling. He had known about the woman's thieving habits for a long time, but he didn't suppose she actually sneaked into houses. Although she *had* tried to explain her presence in Breene's place. The first time she had ever gone into one of the houses, she said. A very unfortunate intrusion, indeed. If she had just gone on down the hall out the back door and not into that particular room, there'd have been no harm done. Curious how little things made the difference between life or — well — sitting in a kitchen chair waiting for someone to walk in and find you.

It was very quiet and peaceful sitting here in the big dining-room with the green-leaved trees pressing close against the windows but not quite shutting out the morning sunlight. You wouldn't know there was a city within a hundred miles, really. It was pleasant enough loafing in the garden on a hot day, listening to the splashing of water in the fountain basin and the voices of birds. He'd had quite a bit of fun there, since first he came to live in the big house with Violet. But he was tired of it now, weary of trying to get enough money out of a moribund practice to pay the bills, sick to death of being shut-in by circumstances, frustrated in every natural desire.

It was not that he disliked the practice of medicine. On the contrary, he was fond of his profession and really quite good at it. But he hated the kind of patients who called him and the places he had to go. It wasn't exactly a slum practice, but it was only a step above. Most of his patients crawled out of their beds to let him in when he rang the bell, because the other members of the family were away at work. He might be asked to bring in the milk from the back door, or empty the bed-pan. What good was an air of detachment or a perfect bedside manner in a case like that?

He had been prepared to go on indefinitely, since there seemed no escape from the rut into which he had fallen. After the mess he had made of things in the east, he really should have been grateful for a new identity and a chance to earn any kind of a livelihood at his own profession, however shabby that living might be. And then chance, in the form of a bottle of gin and a little carelessness on the part of Joseph Sleep, had revealed to him the knowledge of Kitty McKay's money. It really had been stupid of Sleep to leave the drawer of his desk unlocked, especially when he chose that occasion to get blotto. The old man shouldn't drink at all, really, but every once in a while he forgot it wasn't 1890 any longer and went on a dignified bender.

When he first learned about Kitty and the money which Sleep was to handle, Palling had been merely envious. Then he began to form idle plans as to what he would do if such luck had come his way. From that it was a simple step to practical scheming designed to accomplish such a desirable state of affairs. At first he had tried to arrange things so that he could handle everything himself. Then gradually he came

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to the realization he would require assistance for the plan forming in his mind. Breene seemed a perfect accomplice, but he hesitated to broach the matter until one day the undertaker gave him a perfect opening. He had got a little drunk and betrayed the fact he was desperately hard up and just about ready to chuck the whole struggle forever. Before they separated the matter was pretty well settled. All that remained had been to work out the method and the details. Palling had rather prided himself on the method he had hit upon. It was damned clever, he thought. Too clever to throw away because of the intrusion of a totally useless female like Sarah Reckon. Certainly, when he began, he hadn't envisaged murder, but there it was. The thing had been done. There was nothing they could do about it now, but take advantage of their position as physician and undertaker and cover it up.

Furtively, he glanced at the clock above the marble mantel. Nine-thirty. Why the devil didn't someone come, he wondered, a touch of nervousness disturbing him. The nephew should have got home by this time. That had been taken into consideration last night when they took Sarah back to her house. The nephew would arrive, they figured, quite early, and do the natural thing under the circumstances which was call the nearest medico. Where had he heard that phrase recently? Oh yes, last night at Sleep's. He had used it himself. The old fool had given him a nasty quarter of an hour with that attack of his. It would have been just the sort of trick the old twister might be expected to play if he had pegged out and rendered useless all the experimental work of the past month. To say nothing of making Sarah Reckon a needless martyr in the cause of — well, say of science. Not so long ago he would have given anything to see Joseph Sleep dead. Now it was the last thing in the world he wanted.

Chance governed everything, it seemed. It had been chance which had brought him to live in Poldrate Street, and certainly the most extraordinary of all chances which had thus made him neighbour to the one man in California who, so far as he knew, could ruin his plan to start life over again. One man in millions, and he had to be the owner of the house next to his in this residential Sargasso where he had thought to hide himself.

For a long time Ivar Palling had felt he was a link in a chain which some unseen power ahead pulled irresistibly over a rough road. Ever since the time, five years before, when he had been house physician in a second rate New York hotel and made the little slip which started him on his travels. He always thought of the affair as a slip. Any man in his position might have made it. He knew lots of cases where doctors had done things far worse and gone serenely on without punishment of any kind. The fellow probably would have died, anyway. It was unfortunate he should have been the nephew of a very well-known surgeon in one of the state hospitals who took the trouble to make inquiries.

Joseph Sleep had been a guest in the hotel. One of hundreds. It was like him, Palling thought, to be the only one of all those hundreds curious enough to find out why the

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house physician had been changed so suddenly. Somehow, he had gained that accursed bit of information which must have seemed utterly useless. But it wasn't. Chance again. Sleep had trotted off to his train and gone home. Palling wandered over the by-ways of thirty states and when he finally got himself a license to practice in California and settled down in Los Angeles — there was Joseph Sleep grinning at him over the top bar of his front gate. There were certain irregularities about the method by which he had obtained his license which rendered Sleep's grin unusually disturbing.

The spectre of that old scandal was always beside him. Sleep had said nothing. Perhaps he never would, but Ivar Palling was not the man to rest contentedly under such a threat. Night after night he had sat beside his open window, smoking, searching for some way to end the intolerable situation. And then at last he had stumbled upon the secret of Sleep's guardianship and what it meant to the old man. Why the devil didn't the door-bell ring?

He was worrying now about Violet. She was certain to suspect something, and, when at last the bell did ring, she would know that was why he hadn't gone out. Particularly when she heard the message. There was nothing wrong with Violet's mental processes. He cursed himself for not having foreseen the possibility of this delay and made plans to take care of it. If Violet began asking awkward questions there would be the devil to pay. He knew the hot jealousy in her which might think it had cause to go on the warpath. She might get the idea he was keen on Kitty. He had seen her looking at the girl last night, and thought at the time that there was likely to be trouble between two such wild animals. That's what women like that were. He knew the type and he suspected Kitty belonged to it. There was no doubt about Violet. Tall, slender women with wide mouths and predatory eyes. He had met many of them in the practice of his profession. Violet was one of the finest examples he had ever known.

She'd make trouble, given an excuse or merely for the reason that she wanted to, without any excuse at all. She had made him nervous last night when she asked those questions about his supposed patient on Eighteenth Street. He must remember to put through an account item in his books. She'd look for it, he knew. It would be worth going to any trouble, even to digging up someone and paying her to play the part. He'd do that rather than face one of Violet's sudden, deadly rages.

Anger and passion, they were very closely allied in Violet. That was what had attracted him, the shameless, headlong passion and the wild anger which made her such a beautiful thing to be overcome with sheer brute strength and tamed by the oldest method known to mankind. He was a little tired of it all now, but she mustn't be allowed to suspect it. He confessed to himself he was just a little afraid of her. When the time came for their parting, as it would, of course, one day, he must be prepared for anything, *anything*. He must see, for instance, that the little pearl-handled revolver was made harmless. Blank cartridges.

He must be careful not to let Violet catch him examining the gun again, as she had

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last week. He had taken it out of her bureau drawer and carried it to the window, the better to examine the workmanship. He hadn't intended letting her know he had discovered its hiding place, but she walked so silently, she had been at his elbow before he knew. He tried to pass the incident off with a casual comment about the gun's smallness. It was difficult, he said, for him to cradle it properly in his hand and get the trigger finger into place. She had taken it from him without a word, aimed, almost without looking, and shattered a vase fifteen feet away across the bedroom. That was her way, he knew, of showing how completely the tiny weapon suited her hand. Then, still silent, she had tossed the gun back into the drawer and summoned the maid to sweep up the broken pieces. That was the reason they didn't have a girl now.

Apparently the servant had been in the hall when the shot was fired. She had picked up the pieces and carried them down to the kitchen. After that, she went directly to her room and packed. She didn't hold with guns in the house, she said. Her last place had been in the establishment of an alcoholic who had been in the habit of shooting parti-coloured reptiles off the mantelpiece. She had left when he started taking pot-shots at anything in the house which moved, including the servants. As she went down Poldrate Street, carrying the imitation-leather suit-case, he had watched her stop to talk with the Reckon woman.

It had annoyed him to think the incident would soon be common Poldrate gossip. But the sequel left the Pallings one up. Violet had been watching from her bedroom window. She had come along the garden path, swept past him at the gate and gone down the street. Mrs. Reckon and the maid watched her approach with veiled hostility. He thought, of course, she was going by without paying any attention. But just as she came abreast, Violet stopped with tigerish swiftness, wrenched the suit-case from the maid's hand and snapped it open. From the mass of cheap clothing she had retrieved two sheets and some table napkins marked with the letters "I.P." The woman's blistering protest had been silenced by the evidence of theft Violet tucked under her arm. Mrs. Reckon disappeared abruptly, leaving the woman down on her knees repacking her bag.

He was waiting for Violet when she reached his gate. He smiled and murmured, "Good for you, Violet. Victory with a vengeance." She looked at him with those chocolate-coloured eyes which were almost black. "I'm not finished yet," she said, and went to the telephone. He listened, wondering, while she called the police and told them to go to the woman's house and recover other articles stolen from his house. She had gone down, later, and sworn out a warrant for arrest. "It's been going on ever since she came," Violet explained casually. "We weren't paying much. I thought it cheaper to wait until she quit. I knew we'd get the stuff back." Devilish, he thought, looking across the table. Even in repose her face suggested sudden and violent action. A woman who could let a maid steal, biding her time, was deep, never to be taken lightly.

He wondered if she might be biding her time with him, too. There was a period

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when he had thought he knew all about her. But not now. He had met her one night, soon after coming to California, when his car stopped for a traffic signal. There had been one of those sudden, semi-tropical rains. She was standing at the curb, sheltering under a newspaper. Their eyes had met through the pouring rain and, acting on impulse, he threw open the door just as the signal changed from red to green. If she had hesitated, he would have gone on, for the impatient horns were already challenging behind. But with that swift motion he had come to know so well, she slid into the seat beside him. Even as he reached across her body to close the door, her left hand caught the gear-shift, slipped it from low to second and into high. They were past the intersection by the time he straightened. It was that swift cooperation, simple in itself, which interested him from the first. Another woman would have leaned back, letting him do everything.

Violet had come into the car wet through, her flimsy semi-tropical clothing clinging to the long straight lines. She didn't seem to mind. "You ought to have a drink," he said, and she smiled. He felt the warmth of her splendid body pulsing along his leg where her thigh touched him. They had gone into a night bar and had several drinks. Then they had gone other places and danced. From that time until they came into this big, dreary house in Poldrate Street, they had never been apart. After that first night they had gone away into the mountains for a week, living in a log cabin with a big stone fireplace and taking solitary walks under the pines. He asked no questions. She volunteered the information that she was a New Yorker, a trained nurse and looking for work.

There was something about her accent which made him doubt the New York origin, a liquidity in the vowels, a slurring precision in the words. It was only when he learned, by accident, that she spoke Spanish and French he guessed she came from somewhere in the South. Latin America or the Islands, perhaps. Three years ago, now. For a long time he had ceased to speculate about her.

The first year had been volcanic. She clung to him like some strangling jungle plant. Between liquor and the numbing effects of her insatiable passion, he had almost gone under. Only the need for money to support their establishment forced him to pull up short and pay attention to his practice. In that first year of continuous debauchery he had spent almost everything he brought away from New York. He told her nothing about his past. Two people held together by passion that was like madness, neither knowing nor caring what had gone before that moment when they met in the rain. She used to wait for him in the dark hall, silent and invisible. When he came in, she fastened on him without warning, her hot lips seeking his and her hands tearing at his clothes. The thought of that attack in the dark used to haunt him all day. He went home quivering and eager.

It stopped almost as suddenly as it began. For a long time now he had not touched her. He really couldn't say which one of them had cooled first or if it had been mutual. But she still possessed him, still viewed the approach of any other women

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with instant suspicion. Passion could not go on boiling for ever, but he still meant clothes, food, security to her. That was only natural, he supposed. He was content with this relationship, for the time being. He had found it pleasant to be less of the lover and more of the physician. He was glad, on the whole, that he had never married Violet. It would make the eventual separation easier. She had no legal hold over him.

With a sudden start, he glanced at the clock. Damn! The hands were just short of ten. He must make a show of going. Perhaps by the time he got his bag and checked his list of calls — there it was now. The old-fashioned bell on its coiled wire spring attached to the kitchen wall jangled harshly. Steady, there, my boy. Mustn't show too much eagerness. Deliberately he lowered the paper. Violet started to rise.

"Let the maid answer it," he said curtly.

She laughed. "We haven't any maid. You'd better go yourself. You've been waiting long enough."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, trying to keep anger out of his voice. She got in front of him as he walked into the twilit hall. He had been right about her. She suspected something, and when she heard what was wanted she'd start putting two and two together. Well, it was too late to stop her now.

Without turning, Violet went ahead of him to the front door. In the little vestibule he made a play of taking down his hat, pretending indifference.

The door swung open, revealing a young man. He was very tall, with massive shoulders and narrow hips. His nose was slightly out of line, but it failed to mar the handsomeness of a sun-browned face. He was bare-headed and there were pieces of surgical bandage showing through the mop of chestnut hair. Palling noticed the enlarged knuckles in the bony, powerful hands.

The young man looked at them with steel grey eyes. His voice was worried. "I'm Jimmie Lane," he said. "There's something the matter with my aunt, Doctor. Can you come over?"

CHAPTER FIVE

VIOLET PALLING WATCHED the two men hurry down the garden path and into Poldrate Street. Perhaps it might be more precise to say she saw two men go down the path but watched only one.

From the moment she opened the door, she had been tremendously engrossed in young Jimmie Lane's magnificent body. So much so that she scarcely realized what he was saying. Something about his aunt and could the doctor come. She recalled the little sideways glance he had given her, and the flush as he murmured that he was afraid it mightn't be any use. Apparently he had not waited to make sure.

Unconsciously, she stepped on to the veranda, her eyes fixed on the two heads,

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still visible above the foliage. When they passed from view she went slowly down the path. Leaning on the gate, she gazed towards the entrance of the Reckon house.

Now that Jimmie Lane was out of sight, she was able to think of something else, although one corner of her mind still toyed with the memory of his lithe young body, cat-like, not quite letting it go. But her main concern at the moment was a reason for Ivar Palling's delayed departure. She had been fairly positive he was waiting for something, and when the ring came at the front door bell, she was certain it would prove the reason. But what possible connection could there be between Ivar's curious change of habit, the arrival of Jimmie Lane and the condition of Jimmie's aunt, Mrs. Sarah Reckon?

Ordinarily she would have paid no attention to the unusual presence of "Face" Gordon in Poldrate Street at this time of the morning. But she was alert to notice the unusual, suspicious of anything which departed from the routine. On this particular day and at this time, young Gordon should be absent getting rid of the remainder of his magazines. Either he had been unusually active and sold them all at a very early hour or there was something in the street which kept him hanging about. Idly, she tried to link Ivar's lateness, "Face" Gordon's presence and the sudden crisis in the life of Mrs. Sarah Reckon!

"Face" was loitering in front of the Reckon place. He appeared to divide his attention between it and an old roadster which stood before the gate. The car, she saw, carried an Arizona license. That would be Jimmie's. It wasn't much, she thought, for such a man to own. Not that it mattered since one didn't make love to the machine.

It would be interesting, she thought, going to the fights if one knew a fighter. She'd have to see him again very soon. She wondered if it would be all right to have a party. Not like Joseph Sleep's party. Something lively. She could invite Jimmie Lane. There was a perfectly good reason because they would have to return the old man's hospitality. Ordinarily she would have put it off a long time. Now she wondered if tonight or tomorrow night would be too soon. She must be careful not to let Ivar notice anything. She didn't want to have any trouble with Ivar. Life was too comfortable here, too safe, after all she had been through in the old days.

And yet how tired she was of Ivar! The causes of her first devastating passion for the man lay so far away now, so draped and lost behind the curtaining years it was difficult to understand their compelling nature at the time. He was not her first lover, of course, but he was the first who had come into her life after the thing which had sent her fleeing across the Americas in panic flight. She remembered the ecstasy of those first nights when she lay beside him in the dusk and saw the glimmer of his white skin. White. Her own wasn't quite so white. It was a delicate, pale brown like the memory of last summer's sunburn. But her blood was white man's blood. French and Spanish. That was something to remember when one had stood, as she had, on the edge of the abyss. The memory made her glance down at her finger-nails. They were cherry red and they shone in the morning light. She always kept them like that, hid-

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ing the bluish tinge underneath. Blue under the nails and the liquid chocolate colour of her eyes had made possible the horrid thing that drove her from the Islands.

A man she had refused started the story. Black blood. It wasn't hard to set it going in an Island where blacks, creoles and whites mingled in swarming confusion. At first she had laughed at the thing. But the whisper had grown into gossip and the gossip spread until it was common talk, and talk that was believed. A woman had been found, a black slut from the beaches, who told the tale of a changeling baby placed by stealth in a white man's nursery. She was old and fat and full of rum, but people believed what she said. They were very willing, Violet thought bitterly. Particularly women whose men she had stolen in the days when stealing men had seemed natural.

When she had realized the monstrous story was believed, she tried to fight, but it was already too late. Her own kind avoided her and the blacks closed in. Stealthily at first but with ever increasing boldness, as if determined to make her one of them. And then the man who started it came to her with his proposal. She had only to consent and he would see that the story was killed.

The man was a fool as well as a rogue, she thought. He had been a fool to seek her out stealthily in the dark, because there was no one to see when she had killed him in a sudden storm of rage. Not in her house nor in his, but far out on a solitary stretch of sand she had gone to be alone. She had been sitting there, toying with the gun and trying to find the courage to use it when he came up and dropped beside her, smelling of rum. She had hidden the weapon and listened while he talked. Her silence led him on so that he thought he was winning. He had actually got on his knees and was leaning over her when she placed the muzzle against his breast and pulled the trigger.

Even now, after all this time, she wondered at her coolness when the thing was done. She had got to her feet, standing beside the grotesque figure sprawled on the sand. There had been no regret. Only a little burning gladness that she had stilled his lying tongue for ever. She remembered looking down towards the sea and listening to its approaching whisper as she wondered how long it would be before the tide crept in to hide his footsteps — and hers. She had gone down to meet it and walked back towards the town, the water foaming about her ankles.

For a month she waited, expecting every moment to hear someone coming to take her away. No one came. Dead men with gun-shot wounds were not uncommon in the Islands, and this one had lived a life which seemed to lead to such an end. There were others with better reason than Violet's who might have killed him. No one noticed Violet's departure from the Islands.

It had taken a long time to adjust herself to life in New York. She was always conscious of the golden brown of her skin, the shadowy blue under her finger nails. She was afraid the ghost of that old story might come back to haunt her in the new land. That was why she had fled from the east, gone from one place to another, trying to get away from things she imagined were in the eyes of people who looked at her. Her fear had brought her in the end to California. Then, one night in a storm, she

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had met Palling.

The meeting had meant more than shelter from rain and the callous indifference of a great city, intent upon its own affairs. There had been the triumph of winning personal attention that was more than casual. That was what had given such madness to the first months of their association. Palling had looked at her as a man looked at a white woman and not as those others had regarded her for a long time before she left the Islands.

She was accustomed to it now. It was pleasant to be accepted again as one of a group of white people, even though they weren't very lively. It even gave her satisfaction to see the baffled lust in old Joseph Sleep's eyes when he looked at her. She had only to slide her hand slowly along his arm, to let her long slender leg, sheathed in silk, touch his for a moment and he would come seeking her. He was old. But no man is too old, ever. She knew them, the old ones. Maybe one night, just for the hell of it, she'd have a little fun with him. Before she met Palling her self-confidence had been badly shaken. But for three years now she had been safe.

At first, when she came to live in Poldrate Street, Violet refused to go out except at night. It was pleasant to be safe, pleasant to relax in the seclusion of this little back-water. There was an odour about it which belonged to white people, just as there was about a coloured district which set it apart. She could tell a coloured street with her eyes closed, simply by the smell of it. That was one of the things she had brought from the Islands. She had a very acute sense of smell which was something shared with Mafia Breene. But Breene could detect things with his nostrils which were beyond her. He could tell when a person was going to die. Frightening, that. He could meet someone who appeared perfectly well, but if that person was going to die soon, Mafia knew. He said he could detect a faint odour of decay they carried about with them. He sensed it sometimes in the most unexpected places. There was that jolly grocer over in Washington Street who had always been so big and strong. She had been in his shop one day, over a year ago, buying avocados and some wine when Mafia came in. When her purchases were completed, they left together. The grocer called out merrily, "See you later." Mafia looked back over his shoulder in an odd way and muttered, "Sooner than you expect, my friend." An hour later the grocer was dead. Simply fell down in his store.

There were others, too, that Mafia had tabbed in the same way. It was the first question she always asked him when they met in his little chapel at night. Mafia would be waiting for her with the lights out and the door unlocked so she could slip in, unnoticed, from Washington Street. Before he took her in his arms for the first kiss, she would always ask the same question, "Mafia, am I well tonight?" He would be silent a moment while she waited in terror. Then he would laugh and say, "Perfectly well, Violet. Kiss me."

There was only one person in the street of whom she was afraid and that was Mafia's servant, Cora Blessington. Not that Cora had ever given her cause, but there was

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something in the presence of the huge, watchful Negress which made Violet uneasy. Sometimes, in the street, she had been aware of the other's fathomless heavy-lidded gaze. It brought back the memory of all the eyes which used to follow her movements in the Islands so powerfully. She shunned the coloured servant when she could without appearing too obvious. Because of Cora she would never meet Mafia in his house, but insisted on going to the chapel.

It was not only the black woman's watchful eyes she feared. There were things in herself, deep, powerful instincts she could neither understand nor, at times, control. She wanted to do things a white woman shouldn't do, things she had done as a child when, almost engulfed in the tide of blackness about her, she had copied the songs and dances of the Negroes.

Sometimes, when Cora was alone in the big house at the end of Poldrate Street, with Mafia away on business, the coloured woman brought in her friends. On such nights she felt restless and excited. She would creep into the garden and watch the coloured people shuffling down Poldrate Street in twos and threes to the last house. They whispered excitedly as they went by, carrying paper parcels and musical instruments. Later, when the music began coming through the trees with a steady, pulsing beat, it affected her like jungle smells reaching a caged lioness. As the evening wore on, she always began drinking, alone and in the dark. That was something Ivar never understood, although he tried to humour it, her love of darkness. When she was alone in the Palling house she never had any lights. She loved to go from room to room in her bare feet, silent and shadowy. In the summer time she prowled about in the garden, revelling in the freedom and darkness. As the mood of passion mounted, she shed her clothes, garment by garment, until in the end she moved through the shrubbery nude and lithe, like some sleek jungle cat.

Ivar used to find her like that sometimes when he came home. He had learned to fit into her mood and yield to it. That was all over, of course, at least where Ivar was concerned. For some time it had been Mafia and now there was young Lane. Good hunting, she thought. He would be magnificent. She hoped he was a good fighter, a real savage. He had the body for it. She wanted to see it stripped to trunks, glistening with sweat, flashing through a haze of smoke, with a roar of sound rising in crescendo as he drove a man into the ropes, smashing his way to a knock-out. She found herself snapping her fingers in excitement and stopped, feeling guilty and afraid. It was one of her bad habits. She had tried to break herself because she knew it was a Negro habit, the way she did it, snapping her fingers and letting her shoulders sway.

It seemed a long time Ivar had been in the Reckon house. What would he do about his other cases? He should have almost finished his morning round by now. That new woman in Eighteenth Street? She must find out about her. There was something odd about the story. She was always jealous of a new woman patient. That was the curious thing about her feeling for Ivar. She didn't care for him any more in the old way, but it made her jealous to think of him having women patients.

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It never occurred to her that Palling might be jealous if he suspected she had relations with other men. Breene, for instance. She wondered what he would do if he found out about herself and Breene. She remembered the incident in her room when she had caught him with the revolver. It had been a wonderful opportunity to let him see how well she could shoot. It might make him think twice before he tried to get rid of her. She had understood quite well the half-formed thought in his mind about damaging the little gun. What would he think if he knew she kept another gun, a thirty-eight, fully loaded and hidden in the bottom of her trunk? He could damage the little one if he liked. But she must keep an eye on it, because if she found anything wrong, she'd be on the watch for trouble.

There was someone behind, approaching with a tread both heavy and soundless. Cora. Without turning, she realized the woman had stopped. She could hear her deep, slow breathing, and detect the heavy odour of heliotrope which drenched her clothing.

"'Morning, ma'am."

Slowly Violet turned. "Good morning, Cora." The Negress stared at her with impenetrable eyes. She was immaculate in a white, starched house-dress and a white apron. She carried a market basket cradled snugly in one enormous arm. Two gold rings in the lobes of her ears were like little circles of light against the ebony cheeks.

Violet felt faintly uncomfortable under the other's steady gaze. "Is there something you want?" she asked, a touch of hauteur in her voice.

"No, ma'am. Ah jus' wanted to say there's something wrong in Mrs. Reckon's."

"I know, Cora. Dr. Palling is there now."

"Ah know that, ma'am. He telephoned Mista Breene."

Violet turned quickly, looking at the woman. "Telephoned? You mean —?"

The Negress nodded heavily. "Yes, ma'am. Mista Breene's going in."

Violet murmured a few words of surprise and regret. It was hard to do more. She had never talked to Mrs. Reckon, but she had sometimes said "Good morning" as she passed the other woman at her gate. With a feeling of dismay, she realized her plan for a party was likely to be spoiled. She could have one, of course, but could she persuade Jimmie Lane to attend? Perhaps, if she talked with him, put it on the grounds that she was having only a few friends who would help him to forget. That is if he had anything to forget. His aunt's death mightn't affect him very much. Certainly he hadn't spent very much time at home in the three years Violet had known Poldrate Street. He might go away again almost immediately and there wouldn't be any reason for coming back. She thought swiftly that she must see him at once. Perhaps she could make it worth while for him to remain.

The coloured woman shuffled off down the street, leaving the air rank with heliotrope. Violet watched the wide, spotless figure until it turned into Happen Street. She didn't pause, Violet noticed, to speak to "Face" Gordon. There was some sort of feud, she remembered, between the two. It had something to do with Cora's child, the one nobody ever saw because he didn't come out of the bedroom. She hadn't

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got along with young Gordon herself. When she first came to the street, she tried to make friends with him but he refused. He was older now. Perhaps he would be more amenable. Might be worth trying, just for the fun of it.

Young Gordon had finished his inspection of the Arizona car and was watching the house again. He must have found out, somehow, about Mrs. Reckon, because he was already there when Ivar went in. She wondered how he had got the news.

At the other end of the street, she heard a gate open and close. Mafia Breene came hurriedly towards her. She drew back, sheltering behind the shrubbery. She knew he would glance in as he passed. Then she could ask him about the Reckon woman. And about tonight. She counted his steps. To her surprise, he was going by without glancing in. She called his name. "Mafia." He seemed determined to ignore the call for he took another step before he stopped. Then he looked at her, frowning. "I can't stop now, Violet," he said in a low voice. "Someone's likely to see us."

"What happened to Mrs. Reckon?" she asked. Mafia seemed relieved about something, but he continued to fidget. "She's dead," he said. "I'm going in." Violet spoke in a low, carrying whisper. "Tonight, Mafia?" He glanced along the street, his brow wrinkling in a quick frown. "I'm likely to be busy. I — I'll let you know." He went away quickly then, vanishing from the opening with his second step. Violet stood motionless, quick anger mounting. Breene had never treated her that way before. Perhaps it was because he was "going in." But he had never let his work come between them. Sometimes, as a prelude to their hour together in the chapel, he had taken her down into the undertaking rooms to look at bodies awaiting disposal. She had got some kind of a fearful thrill out of it, knowing herself alive and quick with passion. She told him how it affected her. He looked at her queerly. "Necrophilia," he called it. She had asked what that meant, but he only shook his head and laughed.

CHAPTER SIX

MAFIA BREENE walked along Poldrate Street at a leisurely pace. His head ached violently as a result of last night's drinking.

He kept his eyes on the grass beside the pavement, hoping it wasn't too obvious he was looking for something. The scissors must be there, somewhere, he was sure. They had been in the basket when they started from his house and they weren't there when they got into Sarah Reckon's kitchen. With Sleep and his precious party waiting for them, there had been no time to start a hunt.

He wanted to find the scissors but he wasn't sure what he would do if he did. That Gordon brat was standing by the Reckon gate, watching him. Maybe if he came to them before he was too close, he could stoop to tie a shoe-lace and pick them up without being seen. If things went wrong, they might be important because his finger

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marks were on the metal. Palling's, too, he remembered. Confound that Gordon kid.

There was no doubt Sleep had wondered at their long absence last night. Palling's story about a woman in Eighteenth Street had been pretty thin. Violet, for one, didn't believe it. She'd be asking him about it when she got him alone. He'd have to be careful and off-hand. Dangerous to be too precise and emphatic. Blast the woman, he thought. She's becoming a nuisance. It had seemed fun when first it began, taking her away from Palling, right under the fellow's nose. Now he wished he'd had the sense to think a little bit ahead. The affair had lasted for more than six months and he saw no end to it. The woman would raise the very devil if he tried to get rid of her.

He was conscious of the bright regard of young Gordon as he approached the Reckon gate. He tried to make his manner casual. He hoped his scrutiny of the grass would be mistaken for the manner of a man lost in thought. He flattered himself he was getting away with it. The boy's voice startled him. "Lost something, Mr. Breene?"

He stopped, staring. "Eh?" He felt safe behind the poker-face of the professional solemnist. His face had always been good at it.

"Tell me what it is, Mr. Breene, and I'll help."

Mafia opened the Reckon gate and passed through. Over his shoulder, his eyes still on the ground, he tossed a casual disclaimer. He was conscious of the fixed regard boring into his back so that his search of the garden path was a little less than thorough.

The front door was ajar as he went in. That was how they had carried Sarah in so the scissors couldn't be anywhere at the side of the house. There was no one in the front hall. He stood for a moment, listening. On the floor, beside the stair, he saw a roll of blankets and a pack. There was also a stout walking stick. The blankets looked clean and the leather straps around the roll were polished. The canvas pack, originally khaki colour, was bleached almost white with frequent washings.

He crossed the hall and stooped to examine the pack. His first impression of shining cleanliness was confirmed. He noticed the end of a fiddle, carefully swathed, protruding from the pack. It was certainly news to him if Lane had a turn for music. There was something else, too. His extraordinarily sensitive nostrils detected the mixed odours of soap and oranges. There was a sturdy out-doors look about the things, accentuated somehow, by the odours. They could not belong to young Lane, he thought. He knew the sort of place a fighter frequented gave the combined smells of sweaty garments, tobacco, liniment and steam baths to their clothing. He stood up, frowning. Lane must have brought someone home with him. A stranger might make things awkward.

The sound of an automobile exhaust in the street interrupted his thoughts. He didn't have to go to the door to recognize the wheezy cough of his old service wagon. He should have remembered to tell Monk to bring it in the lane so they could take Sarah out the back way. The less attention they attracted, the better, but it was too late now. He glanced out the door. Monk was backed into the curb and already had

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the doors open and the stretcher out. Fortunately young Gordon seemed to be the only spectator. Perhaps, if they hurried, he would be the only one to see them carry out the woman's body. He went along the hall towards the kitchen.

Palling was there, with young Lane and another man, a man with a beard. He knew instantly that the stranger was the owner of the pack and blankets in the hall. His sun-burned face above the well-trimmed beard shone with ruddy health. He was strongly built, with powerful shoulders. A man you wouldn't want to take liberties with, Breene decided. He had laid out too many not to know what was under the curves of the pepper and salt tweed coat. He noticed with surprise that the coat showed signs, despite its age, of having come from the hands of a good tailor. The man's shirt, khaki like the pack in the hall, was bleached with washings. Open at the throat, it showed a hairy, sun-burned chest. An outdoor man, he looked, a man seldom within four walls. Fifty, or thereabouts, Breene estimated. He was leaning against the door-frame, smoking a briar pipe. He saw all this before his eyes went across the kitchen, hunting for the woman.

She wasn't on the chair where they had left her but on the floor. Palling would do that, of course, preparatory to making an examination. The limbs, he saw with relief, were straight. Palling had even remembered to stick a heavy book under the chin to keep it from sagging, and there were quarters on the eyes.

"Ah, Breene." Palling was very professional. "It's our unfortunate neighbour. I've been expecting it. Heart, you know." Breene knew Palling had sat up for two hours after he got Violet off to bed, making entries in his books, proving he had been attending Mrs. Reckon for over a year. That was just in case they had any trouble. Unless there had been medical attendance prior to twenty-four hours before death, he couldn't issue a certificate as to the cause. Not that they expected trouble. How could there be any when they could work the thing between them? Palling gave the certificate. Breene buried her. That was all there would be to it. Palling indicated the fighter.

"You know Jimmie Lane, don't you, Mafia?" Breene nodded. "Yes. I've seen you several times when you've been home." Palling indicated the man with the beard. "This is Highway," he said. Breene turned to look where Palling pointed. "Highway," he repeated stupidly. "What highway?" The stranger took the pipe from between his lips and smiled. His blue eyes were faintly amused. "My name," he said briefly. "I spend most of my time tramping one road or another. Old Highway they call me now. Young Highway once." Breene nodded with sudden understanding. "You mean you're a — a — Yes, I see." He was going to say a tramp, but thought better of it. Highway understood. "You mean a hobo, I suppose. That's what I am. Houses aren't much in my line. I came along to see Jimmie Lane safely home." Breene glanced at the fighter and noticed the bandage showing through his hair. "How'd you get hurt?" he asked. Lane touched his head. "Fight," he said briefly. "Highway found me beside a road and patched me up."

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Breene nodded. It didn't matter very much. What did matter was that their plan was working. Lane wasn't suspicious about his aunt. The stranger's presence didn't make any difference after all. Superior-looking fellow, for a hobo. He glanced towards Sarah. "How'd you find her?" he asked.

He meant Palling, but it was Lane who spoke. "When the front door bell didn't bring any answer, I thought maybe she was out marketing," he said. "We came around to the back door and there she was, sitting looking out, just as if she was waiting for me." Lane's voice faltered for a moment and his face twitched. He actually feels sorry, Breene thought. It hadn't seemed possible because the fellow spent so much time away from home.

Breene bent over the body. The faded brown hair, streaked with grey, was brushed back along the side of the head. He could see the exact spot where Palling's needle had gone in. No one would ever notice the mark lost among the hair. Even if someone looked, which wasn't likely, it would be hard to find. He sniffed gently, searching with his sensitive nostrils for the smell of chloroform which Palling had used first. There was nothing. There wasn't a mark anyone would ever find, and by this time the injection would be totally absorbed in the blood stream. That was the beauty of the stuff, as Palling described it. The victim lived long enough after the injection to destroy the evidence by the simple action of the blood.

He rose to his feet, dusting the knees of his trousers more from habit than necessity. "I'll see what's keeping Monk," he said. As he turned towards the hall door, he hoped no one saw the slight check in his movement. He had noticed the woman's basket with her gloves and flowers on the floor, over against one wall. It was entirely away from a direct line to the table, either door you chose to enter. It occurred to him they hadn't been very careful about that. They should have put it on the table or near the hall door. That would be the natural thing for her to have done, supposing she had felt a weakness as she entered her kitchen. She would drop it as she came in and then head for the chair.

He was annoyingly conscious of the fixed scrutiny of the bearded hobo, but he was too sure of his own poker-face to feel embarrassed. No thought of his, he was sure, ever appeared on its surface. But he hoped the man hadn't noticed the direction of his glance and that momentary check in his walk.

He went into the hall and closed the door. As he did, Highway's voice sounded through the panels. He stopped to listen.

"You say Mrs. Reckon has been suffering from heart trouble for some time?"

Palling's voice, when it came, was casual. "She wasn't a young woman, you know. I've had her for a year or so. Sixtyish, I should say." There was a silence then.

Monk's steps sounded along the hall. He tramped down, carrying the stretcher. He was a big fellow, very strong and silent. In the course of a week he was likely to say only a dozen words. Breene found him the most useful assistant he had ever had. "In here, Monk."

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He shoved open the kitchen door, standing aside for Monk. The first thing Mafia noticed was Highway. He was over by the window with Sarah Reckon's basket, examining the flowers. He'd separated the various kinds into groups. There were at least half a dozen colours. Breene felt a little nervous jump inside him. What was the confounded fellow up to? Palling was watching Highway with what Breene thought too evident interest.

Breene spoke loudly, "Here you are." That brought Palling out of his trance. Monk unrolled the stretcher and laid it on the floor beside the body. He spread a waterproof sheet over it and rolled it on to the stretcher without assistance. "We'll go out the kitchen door, Monk," Breene said. "Too many turns the other way." Monk grunted and caught hold of his end. Breene took the other. As he straightened, he saw Lane looking at him and remembered something. "Come around presently," he said. "I'll want details for the records. Age and all that. You'll want to pick out a suitable casket, of course." Lane nodded. "We'll make all arrangements for the funeral then, my boy." To himself he added that the sooner they got the thing over, the safer it would be. Tomorrow morning was none too soon. What the devil was the tramp fingering those flowers like that for?

Palling opened the kitchen door for them. Mafia was leading. As he stepped across the sill on the back veranda, he lost his balance and fell against the door frame. He heard Palling's voice behind. "Look out, man. You nearly lost it." Breene stood perfectly still while quick hands adjusted the burden. He wasn't thinking of what they were doing. His eyes were fixed on a gleaming cross of metal lying beside the garden path. The sunlight threw the gleam directly at him, like a warning. There was no mistaking Mrs. Reckon's scissors. He knew by the long, square points and the little projection for the finger curving out from one handle.

How could they have got there? He and Palling hadn't come that side of the house at all. They had come and gone by the front door. They should have been somewhere in front or in Poldrate Street. He felt the pressure of the stretcher as Monk pushed from behind. Mechanically he advanced, his eyes fixed on the shining metal beside the path. If only there was a chance to kick the infernal thing out of sight. But he knew the others had come out on the veranda and were watching. He dared not try.

The pressure from behind pushed him on. They reached the corner of the house where the path turned. He glanced back. Highway was bending over the scissors, looking at them with active curiosity. Mafia stopped, forcing Monk to a stand. Palling came down the steps quickly, reaching for the scissors. Good for Palling, he thought. He'll handle them first and that'll put an end to them. Just a pair of ordinary scissors now. But before Palling could touch the scissors, Highway's hand interfered.

Palling straightened with an exclamation of anger. "What the devil do you mean by that, my man?" Highway looked up apologetically. "No offence, Doctor." "Then don't interfere," Palling snapped. He reached for the scissors again, but Highway was too quick for him. Holding a handkerchief, he scooped them up and quickly

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folded the linen over the metal. Monk impatiently shoved from behind, forcing Breene around the corner. He had to go on along the path. What in blazes was that tramp up to? Why else would he use a handkerchief like that if he wasn't thinking about finger-prints? Why should a common tramp get ideas like that into his head?

Frantically Breene tried to remember just how he and Palling had handled the scissors last night. Their marks were on them right enough, but he rather thought Palling's would be on top of his. Not that it mattered. He knew experts could separate the marks and tell you how many people had handled a thing and in what order. And what were the scissors doing at the back door, anyhow? Someone else had put them there. That might mean another set of finger-prints. The perspiration formed on his forehead and trickled down into his eyes. The salty liquid blurred his sight. He seemed to see two of young Gordon, who was still hanging around the front gate.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR A MOMENT, Highway thought Palling would snatch the scissors from his hand. The impulse was plain in his eyes. Then they were masked and cool. There was a touch of hauteur in his manner. He held out his hand peremptorily.

"Let me have those," he said. There seemed no doubt in his tones he would be obeyed.

Highway looked at him quietly. Then, without lowering his eyes, he turned back the folds of the handkerchief. At the same time he withdrew slightly, holding the scissors out of reach. He had no reason for refusing to hand them over but the other's interest roused his curiosity. He purposely emphasized his unwillingness to give them up; watching the other's reaction. He had no suspicion when he picked them up, and the handkerchief had been an involuntary precaution, something done as of long habit. Anger and annoyance were plain in Palling's face.

"Look here, my man. I don't like your manner. Give me those scissors."

"Suppose you tell me why you're so interested," Highway said quietly.

Palling's face flushed. "This is ridiculous. I'm not in the habit of explaining myself to tramps. Lane, tell this fellow to do as he's told."

Lane came down the steps slowly, looking at Palling thoughtfully. "Take it easy, Doc," he said. Highway caught his eye and signalled caution. Lane nodded. "I'm sure it's some sort of mistake," he drawled. Palling was quick to seize this chance to save his dignity. "Of course," he said, "the scissors mean nothing to me. It's the fellow interfering I resented." He ignored Highway, speaking directly to Lane. "Come in and see us, sometime, Lane. I'll go over your aunt's case with you."

Highway watched him go up the steps to the kitchen door. A moment later, he reappeared carrying his bag. With a nod towards Lane, he passed them, going down

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the path. When he was around the corner of the house, Lane turned to Highway.

"Why'd you do that, Highway?"

"You mean the scissors?" He thought a moment. Then he shrugged. "I really don't know, Jimmie. It was something — his hurry to get ahead of me, I guess. I felt he didn't want me to touch them so I was curious to know why. I still don't know."

"What'd you use the handkerchief for?"

"Oh, that. Just habit, I suppose. I wasn't thinking of finger-prints, but when he began to get angry the thought came into my mind that maybe *his* were on them. Queer if they were, eh?"

"Surely you don't think — but how *could* they be?"

"I can't say. They belong to your aunt, don't they?"

"Yes. At least — oh, I don't know. Can't remember. Look here, Highway, you've been mixed up in some crazy things from what I've heard about you. There isn't something — something queer about this, is there?"

"Nothing that I can see, Jimmie. Your aunt *did* have heart trouble, didn't she?"

Jimmie Lane looked doubtful. "I guess so, if Palling says she had. I always thought she was pretty sound myself."

"You mean she never said anything about being troubled that way?"

"No." Lane looked around the run-down garden miserably. "I guess I should have stayed here and helped run things." Highway said nothing. He was studying the motley flower beds, where haphazard blooms fought with the weeds which threatened to choke them. Lane turned and went into the house. "Come in when you're ready."

Highway folded the scissors in the handkerchief carefully and slipped them into a side pocket. He walked slowly along the gravel path to the corner of the house and then left it, wandering into the shrubbery. As he strolled, he took an old briar from his pocket and a pouch, filling the bowl with broad-cut tobacco. He was looking, oddly enough, for flowers. He went slowly through the trees, pushing into tangles and peering into all the dark corners. He saw beds of French marigolds and the ordinary yellow kind. There were matted clusters of red and white carnations, locked in the strangling grip of English ivy. It pushed along the ground, making islands of flower beds which fought for their own bit of soil. There were chrysanthemums, too, and here and there rose vines with masses of bloom. Begonias, geraniums, and Shasta daisies were there in profusion, but the flowers all had the sort of over-blown harvest look about them which comes to growing things in the fall of the year. While he mentally checked off the varieties, his mind was busy with the problem of Dr. Palling. That scissors business was odd, he thought. Why should he want them and act in such a waspish fashion when he failed? Later, when he had finished with the flowers, he would have to sit down with some powder and see what he could do with them. There might be prints. If they turned out to be Palling's, it would open a curious field of speculation.

He made his way into the front garden. It was only a little less of a jungle than at

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the side. He leaned against a tree, smoking, and going over Mrs. Reckon's movements as he imagined them. If Palling's surmise as to the time of her death was anywhere near correct, she must have been gathering flowers only a short time before. That meant she did it in the dark. Why should she do that? Possibly so they would be fresher when her nephew arrived. She might have felt the first warning of an attack while she was in the garden. A woman trying to get into her house before she collapsed wouldn't stop to pick up a pair of scissors. Once inside, she might possibly have dropped the basket where he had noticed it, although it was out of a direct line from either door to the table or the chair where she was sitting when they found her. Certainly her illness had come on rapidly after she entered the house. Otherwise she would never have left the flowers out of water.

His thoughts returned to Palling. There was something about him he didn't like. It wasn't his appearance. He admitted the man had everything a doctor should have, superficially. His manner, when he wasn't angry, was perfect. Highway couldn't reconcile such a fine Big City manner with the rather shabby neighbourhood in which he found him practicing. He wondered where he could get hold of a medical register and look him up. It mightn't lead to anything, but a little more knowledge of his training wouldn't do any harm. Jimmie said he'd been in Poldrate Street about three years. Where, in the immensity of America, had he practiced before he came to live in this little back-water?

People got themselves into curious places, Highway thought. Himself, for instance. His mind flowed back over the long years he had wandered up one road and down another. He had slept under many new stars since that day when he had walked out of a certain house and all houses had become strange and unpleasant places into which he ventured seldom. Now here he was, in the heart of a great city, preparing to live in a house of death with a foot-loose pugilist as host. Well, a few days in the city would make the country all the better when he got back to it. The open road with the wind on his cheek! "Sweet things, Brother," he murmured, thinking of something he had read. His way of life was best.

Slowly, he approached the front gate and leaned on it looking into Poldrate Street. The car, white with Arizona dust, looked as if it had no life left in it. Across the street, the brewery wall was hot and glaring. A boy's voice addressed him. "Hello."

Looking down, he saw its owner seated on the grass, leaning his back against the garden wall. Highway smiled. He knew how to get along with a boy. "Hello, son. You live here?"

The boy jerked a thumb. "That house. You come with Jimmie Lane, mister?"

Highway nodded. "You know Jimmie?"

"His aunt, too. She's dead, isn't she?"

"I'm afraid so, son. Friend of yours?"

"Well, sort of, I guess. She owed me a nickel."

"She did! What for?"

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"Magazine I sold her last night. Do you think I can collect it from Jimmie?"

Highway studied the freckled face. "Perhaps. If Jimmie doesn't pay it, I will."

"Gee, mister. That's decent."

"If we're to accept favours, we should know names, son. Mine's Highway."

The boy stared. "That's a funny name. What's it mean?"

"In the olden times men got their names because of something they did or something they made their fellows think about. That's how I got mine. I spend most of my time tramping one highway or another."

The eyes widened. "Gee, mister, you mean you're a tramp?"

"That's what most people call me, I suppose."

Admiration shone in the wide-open eyes. Then doubt crept in. "You don't *look* like a tramp."

"What does a tramp look like, son?"

"Oh, sort of mean and ornery. Dirty, I guess. You don't look that way."

"Thanks. You haven't told me your name yet," Highway prodded.

"Gordon, mister. They call me 'Face' Gordon."

" 'Face,' eh. H-m-m-m. I understand. Your face is bright — like a looking glass."

"That's 'cause mum makes me scrub it so hard with soap. Did your mother make you do that?"

Highway looked at him sombrely. "Yes, son. She did. That's quite a long time ago. Now suppose you tell me about Mrs. Reckon and the magazine. When did you sell it to her?"

"Oh, about ten o'clock last night, I think." He chuckled at the memory. "She'd just started on her raid when she ran into me so she had to go home and start all over again."

Highway nodded. He was beginning to understand. "You mean she was raiding the neighbours' gardens for flowers?"

"She thought nobody ever saw her but *I* did. I see everything that goes on in Poldrate Street."

Highway smoked complacently. He understood now why there were zinnias in Mrs. Reckon's basket but none in her garden. There were some sweet-peas, too, although he had found none anywhere during his prowl. Presently he would take a walk along the street. Perhaps he could see from the sidewalk where these flowers were growing. He looked at "Face" approvingly. The lad might be very useful.

"So you think she came out afterwards?"

"Sure. She came out all right. I know."

"How?"

"Face" hesitated. There was a vagueness in his voice when he answered. "Oh, I guess she'd come after flowers. She wouldn't be satisfied without."

"But you said you *knew*. Come on, 'Face,' tell me why you're so sure."

"Face" was silent for a brief time, plucking at the grass. Then he glanced at High-

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way, studying the serious, bearded countenance. He's got something, Highway thought, something I'd like to know. He kept perfectly still, smoking. Mustn't frighten him. A word now would put him off. Just wait quietly until he gets ready.

"She dropped something," the boy ventured finally.

"So? Flowers, maybe?"

"Face" looked at him and whispered. "A pair of scissors."

Highway felt a curious sensation stir along the nape of his neck. He puffed once or twice, trying not to let excitement appear in his face. "Scissors, eh? That'll be the ones she used to cut flowers. What did you do with them?"

"Face" seemed to regret having said so much. He frowned and went on pulling up the grass. Highway noticed he was clutching handfuls now.

"I — I knew she was dead — last night," he said at last, and looked up at Highway with scared eyes.

"Why didn't you tell someone then, 'Face'?"

"I — I — cold feet, I guess. I went home. Didn't sleep much though."

"Go on, tell me how you knew she was dead."

"Well, they can't do anything to me, so I may as well. I was coming home after delivering my magazines, using my new torch. That's how I found the scissors. They were along there in the grass. I knew they were hers so — so I just thought I'd take them around to her back door where she'd find them in the morning." He looked at Highway briefly. "I kinda thought it'd save her worrying," he added virtuously.

Highway had a fair notion as to the real reason behind the return of the scissors, but he avoided comment. "You found her when you took the scissors back?"

"She was sittin' on a chair in the kitchen. The door was open an' I shone my torch right on her. I thought at first she saw me. Then I knew she didn't see anything."

"What time was that?"

"Oh, 'bout midnight, I guess."

"What did you do with the scissors, 'Face'?"

The boy looked at him with wide eyes. "Say, I never thought about 'em all night. I musta dropped 'em somewhere."

Highway nodded. The queer tingle persisted at the base of his scalp. Anyway, there was no longer a mystery about the scissors. There was nothing extraordinary about their presence in the Reckon garden. The only thing odd was Palling's curious conduct. Why was he so anxious to get his hands on them? He remembered, too, that Breene had seemed to hesitate as he passed them, and again, as he turned the corner of the house, had actually stopped, looking back. Palling attached some importance to them. Otherwise why lose his dignity?

"Do you think I did wrong — not telling someone last night, Highway?"

"It might have been kinder, but I suppose it was quite a shock for you."

"I didn't sleep much, like I said."

Highway detected the note of pathos in the boy's voice. Romantic little beggar,

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he thought. Dramatizes things. It might be a good idea to see the Street through his eyes. He asked questions about the houses and their occupants. It was curiously fascinating to see people and characters emerge as "Face" described them.

Then Cora Blessington turned in from Happen Street. Highway looked to see what had checked the boy. There was a silence while the huge Negress came slowly towards them and passed. She nodded to "Face" and let her eyes rest on Highway for a moment. He noticed the full market-basket before she went by. The air over the sidewalk was heavy with heat, rank with the heliotrope perfume.

"That's Breene's housekeeper," "Face" explained when the Negress was beyond ear-shot. "She's got a boy. I guess I'm the only one in the street that ever saw him."

"Doesn't he live here?"

"Oh, sure. He's a queer. Never gets out of bed." Cora's boy seemed to exercise a curious fascination for "Face." He had seen him only once when he had gone to Breene's house with a message from his father. The kitchen door was open, with no one in sight. "Face" had gone in, looking for Cora and come upon her suddenly, in the act of giving "Him" his dinner. The giant Negress had turned on him like a tigress and driven him out. "I was scared almost as much as I was last night when I found Mrs. Reckon."

Highway probed thoughtfully, learning a great deal more about the Street and its people. He learned about the mysterious disappearance of the boy's dog. He even found out about Mrs. Palling's quaint habit of sometimes prowling through her garden in the nude, and drew out the related fact that these prowlings usually took place when Cora was having one of her celebrations. Highway puzzled over that, wondering at the possible relation between African music and Mrs. Palling's desire to discard her clothing.

Presently "Face" tired of his rôle of informant and began asking questions. How long had Highway been a tramp? Where did he go when he tramped? How did he make a living? How did he get food? Did he ever work?

Feeling the boy was, temporarily at least, dry of information, Highway knocked the ashes from his pipe. He cast about for a way to make "Face" feel they were friends so he would have no cause to regret being so open with a stranger. Offhandedly, he suggested "Face" drop in when he was free. Highway promised to tell him what being a tramp was really like. The boy's eyes glowed as he got to his feet.

"I gotta go now, Highway. I only stayed around to — well — you know."

Highway watched him go along the street and disappear through his own gate. He was about to turn away when a movement along the street caught his eye. Coming slowly along the sidewalk, he saw a dog. It was brown-coated, with darker coloured saddle marking. Young Gordon's dog! He wondered how it could have got into Poldrate Street at the blind end. He wished he had been a little quicker and noticed from what gate it emerged, but it was already some distance down the pavement. It might, he saw, have come from either the Breene or Sleep gate.

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Highway stepped into the street and walked slowly to meet the dog. It came along with head down. Once it stopped and seemed to sway a little as if from weakness. Coming closer, he saw the animal was lean, its ribs showing along the brown sides. Its starved condition seemed to bring out the mongrel nature of the animal. A boy's dog.

He was within thirty feet before the animal noticed his almost noiseless approach. Then it stopped, drawing back and growling faintly. Highway continued to advance, speaking quietly. "Here, Squire." That was the name "Face" had used. If he had any doubts as to this wretched animal belonging to "Face," the use of the name dispelled them. The dog stopped growling and lifted its head. Highway could see the curious, inquiring look that came into the frightened brown eyes. Almost, he thought, the tail started to wag.

The friendly pause lasted only a moment. Then the dog's head drooped. He stepped weakly into the hot sun beyond the shelter of the trees and began to circle Highway, keeping a wary eye on him. Badly treated lately and learned to be afraid, Highway thought.

Behind him, Highway heard a rush of feet and a glad cry. "Face" ran forward, dropping his magazine bag and kneeling beside the dog, hugging him. Squire's tail wagged feebly. He tried a weak, uncertain bark. Only then did "Face" sit back, staring at the animal in amazement. He glanced up as Highway approached.

"He's starved," "Face" said incredulously. "What's happened to him?"

The dog's coat was thin and stringy. Highway bent down, running his hand over the lifeless hair. He felt the hot, dry nose. Squire made no attempt to draw away from his prying hands. But in his throat, a faint whimper told that the dog was in distress. Something terrible has been done to him, Highway thought.

"He's been stolen and taken miles and miles away," "Face" ventured. Highway lifted the paws. The pads were unworn. There were no signs of travel.

"He hasn't been very far, 'Face.' Very close, in fact. He's been starved but not beaten. I think he needs a meal and a chance to rest. Go careful, though. Not too much food at first."

Without a word, "Face" went along Poldrate Street, the dog close at his heels. The boy picked up his magazines as he passed. Highway watched the two figures until they disappeared at the entrance of the Gordon garden. A few days' rest and decent food would restore the dog. It would take longer, though, to heal that strange wound he had seen under the hair on the animal's breast. He had a curious conviction the wound had been made with a very sharp knife and that the hair had first been cut away from the incision with a pair of scissors.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

JIMMIE LANE STOOD in his aunt's gateway. He saw Highway standing stock still in the broiling sun and wondered what the man was doing. There were other thoughts in Jimmie's head, too, thoughts which made him a little ashamed but which he couldn't help having. He wished a man didn't have to think such things, but, somehow, he felt they couldn't be stopped. He was wishing, in a mild way, his aunt hadn't chosen this particular time to die. If only she had waited a couple of weeks so he could have done some of the things he planned while he was in the city. He wanted to see the local fights for one thing. That meant meeting the boys, finding out who was coming and who was slipping. Maybe, too, he might have got himself a fight in one of the preliminaries. He was ripe for it. One of these days he was going to get into the semi-finals and then pull down a main-event for himself. They couldn't go on ignoring him for ever. He was strong and growing smarter all the time. He hadn't lost a fight in his last thirty-five starts.

His thoughts came around to his aunt. There'd be things to do, he supposed. He began to wonder what would happen afterwards. It wasn't going to be pleasant, coming back with no place to call home. The house was rented. He wondered when the month was up. Maybe if he could get a few fights, he could establish himself in the city and keep the house going. The furniture belonged to his aunt. It was his now, not that it was worth much. Perhaps if he could persuade Highway to throw in with him, things wouldn't be so bad. He had conceived a very high opinion of his bearded companion.

He was a queer bird, Jimmie thought. Not because he wandered the roads. Jimmie did that himself and liked it. But it seemed odd that a man who knew so much should have put his knowledge to such profitless uses. He knew a great deal about things Jimmie had never given a thought to. Politics, history, trade and all that. Not just local things, but big stuff. When he got talking he made you see a picture which took in all the world at once.

He seemed to have something against houses. Didn't like being shut in, he said. It had taken all Jimmie's persuasive powers to get him into the city. The memory made him a bit doubtful about persuading Highway to settle down and help run the house. No harm trying, though. You'd think a man who must be past fifty would be glad of a permanent roof over his head. But he was hard as iron. Wind and legs both sound so perhaps he'd keep tramping for years.

He was clean, too. Every day, somehow, he managed to find plenty of water to bathe. His clothes were always brushed, his linen washed. The queerest chap Jimmie had ever known, and the nicest. He suddenly realized Highway was beckoning him.

He was standing at the entrance to the Palling garden when Jimmie got to him. "This is where the doctor lives, isn't it?" Jimmie nodded. "Do you think you could slip in there and take a look around the garden for me?"

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"Why don't you go yourself?"

"You'd cause less resentment, I fancy. Do you know what zinnias look like?"

"Zinnias? Oh, you mean those daisy things. Sure, I know them."

Highway studied the green shadows. "There were some in your aunt's basket, but I couldn't find any in her garden. Sweet peas, too. I'd like to know where they came from. If you don't find any in here, try the other gardens." He strolled slowly along the street, leaving Jimmie staring after him. Smart, he thought. He'd never seen Sarah Reckon in his life, but he'd found out already she raided her neighbour's gardens.

The street was becoming unpleasantly hot and the green garden looked correspondingly attractive. He sauntered along the paths until, in their aimless way, they had taken him out of sight of both gateway and the Palling house. He realized he rather liked the task. It gave him an excuse to be in the Palling's garden. At first he couldn't understand why being there should be cause for pleasure. Then, suddenly, he remembered the woman who had been standing at the door when he first saw Dr. Palling.

There didn't seem to be any zinnias but there were plenty of roses. That was natural, of course. Roses bloomed all winter in California.

Presently he found a bench and sat down. From somewhere in the shrubbery he could hear the tinkling notes of water falling in a fountain basin. The sunlight, hot in the street, was filtered here by the trees. He hoped no one would find him for a while.

Absently, he fumbled through his pockets, searching for a cigarette. He found one in a crumpled package and lit it. Idly, he watched the blue smoke drift slowly along the path, carried by an air current so faint he could not feel it on his cheek. Only the effort of holding the cigarette kept him from falling asleep. He nodded two or three times and was just drifting into complete surrender when he became aware, somehow, that he was no longer alone.

He sat up, looking quickly around. The cigarette lay where it had fallen on the gravel path, a thin tracer of smoke still rising. He listened intently, hearing only the murmur of doves and the tinkle of the fountain waters. The splashing was even clearer, he thought, than it had been. Suddenly he understood. The run of water notes was louder because someone was splashing in the fountain.

Noiselessly he rose to his feet, intending to leave the garden unseen. The movement raised his eyes to a higher level so he could look over and through a barrier of intervening leaves. What he saw stopped him abruptly. A woman, partially disrobed, stood with her back to him. She was drawing a naked arm back and forth through the waters of the fountain basin.

Jimmie recognized Violet Palling. She was not more than twenty feet away, standing in a little pool of sunlight. While he watched, she shook the moisture from her arm and reached long fingers into the mass of her hair, removing the pins so that it fell in a dark cloud, almost veiling her shoulders. Fascinated, he continued to watch. With quick movements, she shifted the straps of her slip, dropping it down over her hips. He watched the curving play of limbs through the dusky curtain of hair as it rippled

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in the sun. When she stood up after dropping the garment, she was invisible from the hips downward, but he knew by the way she lifted her arms, catching and throwing back her hair, that she was now entirely nude.

For a moment she stood, head thrown back, looking at the distant tops of the trees. Then she stepped up to the invisible rim of the stone basin, revealing the entire figure, long and graceful, with the dark hair falling below her buttocks. For a space, while Jimmie's heart beat rapidly, she balanced. Then she stepped forward and downward, gliding out of sight. He heard the rustling of water as she immersed herself. It was intermingled with low, throaty laughter. He felt the blood pounding in his face and his eyes blurred. Before he knew what he was doing, he stepped across the path and started to force his way through the intervening shrubbery.

It was only when a branch whipped sharply across his face that he realized what he was doing. Suddenly scared, he stopped, trying to control his breathing, hoping desperately the noise of his blundering approach had been hidden by the splashing water. The silence was suddenly complete. There was no sound from the unseen basin. The woman must have heard me, he thought. She's down there, scared. Why doesn't she scream or something?

Try as he would, his sharp eyes could not pierce the barrier. That was lucky, he thought. If he couldn't see, it stood to reason she couldn't see him either. If he could only turn and steal away, unseen, she need never know he had seen her, never know who he was. He stood staring towards the fountain whose slender pinnacle rose above the huge leaves of an elephant's ear plant. He was waiting for the sound of water splashing to cover his intended retreat.

On the top of the fountain pinnacle was a round silver ball. It reflected, in miniature, a delicate reproduction of green verdure and the blue sky. As Jimmie turned to begin his retreat, his eye detected a sudden movement mirrored in the brilliant mercury. It was down towards the curving under side. Startled, he leaned forward again, staring intently. One side of the octagonal fountain basin was visible, its grey stone embracing what seemed to be a brilliant chip of emerald water. Floating on that emerald chip, delicately miniature, was the figure of a woman.

The mercury-ball made a perfect reducing mirror. It was the movement of an arm made in keeping afloat which had caught his eye. For a space he continued to stare at that fascinating vision, all thought of flight forgotten. Without moving his feet, he leaned forward to the utmost point of balance. His movement was reflected in the mercury-ball, and with a sudden rush of fear he realized the truth. If he could see the woman, she also, if her eyes remained open, must be able to see him. The knowledge brought home the danger of his position. Jimmie Lane, fighter, caught spying on a woman in her own garden. He liked headlines, but not that kind.

By raising slightly the level of his gaze, he looked directly into his own eyes. Head and shoulders, reduced to miniature, were visible above the leaves of the elephant's ear plant. Fascinated, he continued to gaze. Had Violet Palling seen him? If she had,

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she certainly took her time to indicate any sense of fear or even displeasure. Except for an occasional lazy movement of one arm to maintain her position, semi-submerged in that chip of azure, she remained motionless. There was no attempt at concealment, no effort to float further around the basin where she would have vanished from the mercury-ball. Neither was there an outcry.

Whether or not Mrs. Palling saw him he did not know. Certain he was that he saw her. The desire to plunge forward rose overwhelmingly.

It was the voice which saved him, a low, husky music, coming apparently from nowhere. For a moment he thought himself discovered. Then he realized the voice came from Violet Palling. She was singing softly as she floated. Relaxed, he listened to the words. If she sang thus, she could have no knowledge of his presence. He could enjoy the vision a little longer.

She sang in a low disturbing fashion. The words themselves were suggestive, but the music was even more so. It had a strange huskiness. It was like an invitation to forget there was anything in the world but desire. Jimmie felt sick and tormented. He knew all he had to do was take three long steps forward and that tiny doll in the mercury would be transformed into a woman. Almost, it seemed to him, he could detect in the sun-warmed motionless air the perfume of her clothes which must be lying on the ground beside the fountain. It was at this precise moment that Violet Palling raised a hand to her lips and unmistakably blew him a kiss!

For a moment Jimmie felt that queer dizziness he had known once or twice in the ring when someone clipped him viciously on the chin. He experienced the same instinct to back pedal and cover up until his head cleared. Motionless in the pool, she had been watching him ever since he stopped facing the barrier of elephant's ear leaves. If he had any doubts, they were dispelled by a little murmur of laughter.

The tiny figure moved in the water, turning and disturbing the azure. The reflection became confused, a mane of tawny hair floating across it as she started to rise. Jimmie realized he was no longer looking at a miniature reflection in a mercury-ball, but at the smiling face of Violet Palling, life-size, above the green barrier. As she raised a thin dressing-gown of pale blue fabric and slipped her arms into it, he knew he had not been mistaken about the perfume. It came to him in a wave, a fragrant carnation invitation sped by the slow, intimate smile. Without pause, he plunged forward through the heavy leaves. The woman's lips sought his with hungry ferocity. In that last second before her face came too close for his eyes to see, he thought it was suddenly transformed into one of those furies he had seen masked on the arches of theatres. The realization of his folly mingled with an acute sense of danger. Through the thin stuff of her robe, he felt her knees, thrust against his, threatening to throw him to the ground. He fought to maintain his balance.

"Hit me. Hit me hard."

"Someone'll see us, Violet."

"You sissy! Hit me. Damn it, *use your fists!*"

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He felt her nails rake his cheek. He realized with a sudden surge of anger he must master her or she would leave her marks upon him for life.

CHAPTER NINE

THIRTY FEET ABOVE THE GROUND, Kitty McKay felt the rough bark of the sycamore tree under her hands as she clung to the main trunk. Curious to know how much "Face" Gordon could see in her bedroom, she had climbed to his favourite vantage point. It wasn't very pleasant being spied upon, but she was more than half-way convinced "Face" couldn't see much anyway. She was too close to tom-boy passages in her own youth not to feel some sympathy for the bizarre impulses of the young. Now, absorbed in the spectacle below, she had forgotten why she was there.

Through a long telescope of leaves and branches she looked down into the Palling garden, watching the struggle between Jimmie Lane and Violet Palling. Her first impulse had been to escape, but a natural curiosity held her motionless. Mrs. Violet Palling was nothing if not thorough, she reflected. She would not have been a woman if she had not been thrilled by the scandalous nature of this unexpected knowledge of her neighbour. At the same moment she permitted virtuous condemnation to dominate her mind, she was conscious of annoyance because the leaves interfered with a clearer view.

Kitty leaned far out as she dared. She was young enough to be shocked and old enough to experience a sense of mischievous amusement. She turned her head away, burying her face against the tree.

"Nice neighbours Mr. Sleep has," she thought. "The woman's married too."

Presently she felt sufficiently armoured to look again. The figures were motionless, seated side by side on the edge of the fountain basin. Kitty leaned against the rough trunk looking upwards through the leaves to the distant sky. One hand brushed back the red hair which had fallen over her forehead.

In her mind she had gone back to the callow youth who had attempted once to make love to her. She had repulsed him, although scarcely aware why she did so. She wondered what she would have done if the youth had looked like Violet's friend. She recognized him from Mr. Sleep's description. Sarah Reckon's nephew, the fighter.

While she studied him, her hand continued to stroke the red hair. She wondered what it would be like to have a man's hand drawn through it. Not any man. That man down there. She leaned away from the trunk, watching.

She could see Violet's lips move and the animation of her face as she spoke, but the distance was too great to hear. She began to be afraid one of them would look up and see her face framed at the end of the leafy telescope. Cautiously she began to edge around, preparing to descend.

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Suddenly she paused, listening. There was the sound of a car turning into Poldrate Street. It sounded like the coupe driven by Dr. Palling. The two in the garden heard it at the same moment. Violet got swiftly to her feet, dragging Lane. Kitty saw her urging him with anxious hands. Escape cut off along the front path, there was no retreat except over the wall into the Sleep garden. He had taken only a step when he vanished from the far end of Kitty's telescope. Violet fled into the greenery beyond the fountain basin.

There was a cautious rustling in the shrubbery below the sycamore. Almost beneath her, but on the other side of the garden wall, Lane's head came into view. He looked up at the top of the wall, studying it. Only for the fact that his eyes were fixed on the closer objective, he might have stared beyond it straight into her own. With practiced ease, so that it seemed like one flowing movement, he leaped for the coping, drew himself over the top and dropped into Joseph Sleep's garden. For a few moments he remained motionless, listening. The silence was undisturbed. She saw him relax and turn to study the garden in which he found himself.

If anything, it appeared even more of a wilderness than the one he had quitted. From his position at the foot of the sycamore, the house was visible only as a windowless fragment, the ground floor lost behind a wall of juniper and privet bushes. Satisfied with his concealment, he leaned against the tree and hunted his pockets. Presently he found what he wanted, a crumpled fragment of cigarette. Its nutty fragrance ascended to Kitty, making her want to smoke. It was rather fun, this, being treed by a man. No doubt when he had finished his cigarette he would go away. She had only to remain perfectly quiet for a few minutes at most. She realized with dismay that if she betrayed her presence he would know she had witnessed his recent passage with Violet Palling. Her face flushed suddenly as hot and red as her hair. It was one thing to play offended innocence in private, but quite another to be an acknowledged witness of what Vermonters would have called "goings on." Kitty felt an appalling desire to cough, and almost choked herself in an effort to remain silent.

No sound came from the gardens. The man leaning against the tree trunk below seemed in no hurry to take his departure. Kitty became a little impatient, wondering how long she was to remain captive. Suppose Joseph Sleep came looking for her. At this time, she knew, he should be taking his daily nap, but you couldn't tell about him.

Her position was becoming irksome in more ways than one. Apart from a natural disinclination to remain still for any length of time, the rising angle of the limb on which she stood forced her hips into harsh contact with the rough tree trunk, unpleasantly irregular through the thin stuff of her dress. She was stealthily trying to ease the strain when a fresh complication took matters out of her control.

Close to her eyes, there was a sudden flutter of ebony wings and a blackbird perched only a few feet away. For a few seconds it stared at her with beady eyes. The bird's bearing radiated haughty disdain which mounted as it ruffled the glistening feathers of its wings and finally emerged in the form of a harsh note of challenge. Instinctively

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Kitty glanced down. Her worst fears were realized. The man below was staring upwards. Even in her confusion, Kitty noticed the open mouth and expression of dedation in his eyes. He has the decency to feel ashamed, she thought. It was the last coherent thing which passed through her mind for some seconds. She knew that from his position, she presented a fascinating spectacle of slender limbs, quite unprotected in any way. Young ladies were not usually viewed at that particular angle by young men. With an exclamation of dismay, she swung around the tree, reaching for a branch upon the farther side. As she did her foot slipped, and in a moment she was hanging by her hands, desperately trying to regain a foothold but unable to go forward or return to the safety of the limb where she had stood so long.

The blackbird uttered an indignant squawk and fled, almost brushing her face with its wings. She heard Lane's voice saying, "Hold it," and then the sound of a scrambling ascension as he swarmed up the tree. Powerful hands cradled her hips, easing the strain upon her arms. In a moment she was standing on a limb, holding to the tree trunk and trying to control her heart which pounded in her breast like a wild thing.

The storm passed swiftly. It was succeeded by anger. She had made herself slightly ridiculous, she felt. Her temper was not improved by the grin with which her rescuer looked up from the lower branch on which he stood. Kitty regarded him coldly. "Thanks," she said, and moved as if to swing past him. The bulky form made no effort to give passage. Instead Jimmie Lane held out a helping hand. Kitty drew back. There was something in her direct gaze which brought a sudden flush to his face.

"How — how long have you been up here?" he asked.

"Why?"

The flush deepened. With a sheepish anxiety, she saw him glance over his shoulders towards the Palling Garden. Even from his lower level, the fountain was visible. He turned back to look at her. There was something of sullen defiance in his manner now.

Calmly she looked down into the sun-burned face, studying the square, determined lines, unmarked except for one fine white scar which crossed the right eye-brow. The hair was still tossed where Violet Palling's hands had ruffled it. He knows I saw them, she thought, but I must pretend I didn't. Keep on pretending until I can get down from this wretched tree and away from him. If only he has sense enough to pretend, too. She realized with a rush of confusion he wasn't going to do anything of the kind. She could tell by the kind of desperate searching expression in his eyes he was hunting for words to defend himself. The knowledge that he knew she had watched, filled her with embarrassment. In a moment her courage deserted her and she was in full flight.

It took only a slithering side-ways movement to get by him on the gnarled rungs of the tree limbs. Under one of her hurried steps, she felt his fingers where her shoe paused for a moment and heard his expression of pain. In a moment she was below and slipping from branch to branch. Above she heard his movements in pursuit. The sound hurried her efforts without avail. He landed on the path beside her almost at

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the instant her feet touched the ground. She would have fled but he barred the way

"Wait — I want to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk. Will you please let me pass?"

Kitty felt the red in her face mounting to meet the helmet of red hair. She saw the same defiant sullenness which had come into his eyes when he first realized she had spied on him. He's not a bad sort, she thought. He — he's just a *man*. There was something wholesome and decent about him, something which radiated from his person. She could see him suffering behind the stormy face in a way which no one but a decent man could possibly do. It's that woman, she thought savagely. That slinking female in the next garden. She remembered how she had sat all last evening, smoking and scarcely saying a word. The woman's eyes had never been off her, just as if she wanted to pick a fight. Well, if she wants a fight, she can have it, Kitty thought recklessly. I'm going to save this boy from her. If she ever looks at him again, I'll — I'll —— Kitty's eyes suddenly opened wide with such a startled expression as she realized where her indignation had carried her that young Lane stared back in amazement.

"Say," he demanded, "who *are* you, anyway?"

"I'm Kitty McKay. Mr. Sleep's ward."

"When'd you come?"

"Oh, not long ago. Now if you'll let me pass ——"

"You weren't here last time I was home."

"No. I suppose you're Jimmie Lane, the fighter."

He was pleased. "How'd you know that?"

"Mr. Sleep told me. He said you're what they call a prelim."

The pleased look disappeared. "Everybody starts as a preliminary fighter. I won't be that much longer. I can fight all right."

"Oh, I'm sure of that." He peered at her suspiciously.

"I don't like the way you said that. What d'ye mean?"

"You're a good deal of a brute, aren't you, Jimmie Lane."

"Say, I don't get that at all."

Kitty shrugged. She had his interest now. "I believe your Aunt Sarah ——"

It was cruel, she knew. A shadow fell across his face. "She's dead," he said harshly.

"Nice way you have of celebrating," she said, and slipped past him suddenly. She heard nothing, but he must have taken three long strides with cat-like speed. A hand caught her arm, dragging her about to face him.

"Say — look here, you ——"

She was furious. "Take your hand off my arm!" He obeyed, but continued to tower over her, frowning and dangerous. He nodded towards the Palling garden.

"You've got to understand about that. It's never happened before. It won't again."

Kitty tried hard. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"Oh yes, you do. You've been taking it out of me ever since you started to talk.

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You've got to listen. I've been six months on the road. I've fought four and five times every week. I've never looked at a woman. Then when I saw her — the way she was — damn it — if you weren't a girl, you'd understand."

Young Lane seemed to realize the futility of words. He stood there, awkward and smouldering, one foot digging holes in the gravelled path. From his deep-set, almost colourless grey eyes, he gave her a single glance which conveyed an impression of confusion and misery. After that he avoided her gaze. Kitty felt she should leave him now, that she had nothing to gain in waiting and perhaps much to lose. At least he respected her. He was toiling even now with the desire to set himself right in her estimation. By waiting, giving him further opportunity, she seemed to condone in some fashion the disgraceful scene in the Palling garden.

And then, suddenly, a new thought came to her. Suppose he should take her in his arms? She trembled at the idea, knowing she would be helpless to resist, either physically or spiritually. Once he had her in his arms he would know the secret she would rather die than reveal. He would hold her as he had held Violet and in his thoughts she would be just as cheap. Cheaper, perhaps. Knowing her danger, she tried to escape. Almost as she moved, his hand closed again over her arm. She looked up at him knowing there was both appeal and eagerness in her eyes. The words he was about to utter died on his lips. They remained motionless, staring at each other, each knowing there were no words to express what had happened to them.

Lane was the first to speak. Her name escaped him in a whisper:

"Kitty."

"Yes."

"I'll never see that woman again."

Kitty thought: if he takes me in his arms now I'll hate him all my life. Aloud, she said, "No?" with a faintly derisive note.

The grip tightened on her arm. She felt tears start from her eyes, tears in which mortification, pain and a desire to shake him were mingled beyond understanding. He saw the moisture on her cheeks and in a surge of emotion, swept her into his arms. She felt the hard, club-like grip around her body and struggled.

"Let me go."

"No. You've got to believe me, I'll never see her again."

She thought her hands were against his breast, but by some strange impulse they were locked behind his head. She felt his lips on hers, not roughly but strangely gentle and sweet. She felt the blood pounding through her body. It was all wrong, she knew, and tried to push him away, but there was no strength in her arms. Somewhere she thought her name was called, but it couldn't be Jimmie. His lips were against hers. If he had spoken, she would have felt his voice vibrating through her senses. She knew there was no use in trying to get away. The world roared around her like the clashing of a brazen band.

She heard her name again, louder this time. There was no doubt about it. They drew

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apart, but their hands still clung to each other. Jimmie's eyes sought hers, questioning and startled. She heard her name once more. It was Joseph Sleep, somewhere in the garden, searching for her. At that moment she hated him savagely.

"Quick, Jimmie, hide. It's Mr. Sleep."

She shoved him towards the shrubbery behind the sycamore.

"I thought these gardens were private," he mumbled as he disappeared.

Kitty smoothed her dress, ran quick hands over her hair. As she removed traces of her recent passage-at-arms, she walked along the path. Her senses were in such a riot of confusion she trembled at the thought of facing Sleep's inquisitive glances. If only she could reach the first turn before he appeared, Jimmie would be safer. After that, she must take the old man into the house, keep him occupied so Jimmie could get away. They met at the turn.

Sleep was wearing his slippers. He stopped, looking at her sourly. She knew this was the hour for his morning sleep. What was he doing here looking for her?

"Why didn't you answer me? I've been yelling my head off."

"I just heard. The trees make it hard, you know."

He looked at her searchingly, his eyes settling on her dress. She glanced down. There was a green stain on the fabric where she had rubbed against the sycamore.

"That's nothing," she said carelessly. "I was climbing a tree."

"Climbing a tree?" He seemed a little startled. Then he chuckled. "Of course, I'd forgotten that's what trees were for. Often did it when I was young. Your grandmother, too." He proffered his handkerchief. She was sorry she had hated him. "Shouldn't you be sleeping?" she asked kindly.

"I should. But a man can't get any peace in his own home these days. That Gordon brat was here with a message."

"Message?"

She finished rubbing the mark and handed back the handkerchief. Then she took his arm and tried to urge him along the path. He refused to stir while he searched his pockets impatiently. She was acutely conscious of a faint crackling in the bushes where Jimmie was hidden.

"I put it in one of these pockets. Know I did."

"What's it about?"

"It's from that Palling woman. Violet Palling."

"What's the message about?"

"Here it is. It's to me, but she wants you, too."

"What for?"

"She's giving a party. Got the idea from me, I suppose. Tonight, at her house. You needn't go unless you really want to."

"Who's going?"

"Oh, I suppose just the ones who were there last night. There's nobody else. Hope it's better than mine, that's all."

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"I think it might be nice to go."

"Humph!" He seemed a little disappointed. "Well, take my arm. I've got to get back for my nap if I'm going out again tonight. It's a gay life, Kitty, my dear."

He laughed thinly. As they turned the corner, Kitty glanced back. Jimmie stepped clear of the tree and stood staring after her. She nodded and said quite loudly, "Tonight. I'm sure it will be a very nice party."

Then they were around the bend in the path.

CHAPTER TEN

JOSEPH SLEEP WALKED stiffly beside his ward. He was in a bad temper and the prospect of another late night did nothing to restore his calm.

When the note from Mrs. Palling arrived he had been tempted to destroy it without telling Kitty. But a sudden inexplicable curiosity about her whereabouts had sent him into the garden. He peered at her now as they moved through the shadows, puzzled by the curious flush in her cheeks. There was a brightness, amounting almost to elation, in her manner. She's like a girl who has met her lover, he thought.

It was an absurd idea of course. Save for its utter preposterousness, he might have turned back with some vague thought of searching the garden. Once he hesitated, but the girl's hand was instantly on his arm. Her smile, her bright, disturbing eyes seemed only for him. He sensed a heady perfume as she leaned against his side. Curiously enough, he no longer felt bad-tempered. "Come along, my dear. I'll take my nap in the patio. Perhaps you'll tell Fanny to bring me a cold lemonade."

It was Kitty who brought the lemonade. She placed the glass with its tinkling ice on the table at his elbow and rearranged the pillows behind his head. He watched her from under half-closed lids and was struck by the change in her manner. The flush was gone from her cheeks and the inner excitement. There was a far-away, brooding expression in her eyes as if remembering — what? A maddening conviction formed in his mind. The girl must have had some sort of an affair. Something had happened that very morning which brought the thing freshly to her. What could it have been? A letter perhaps.

As he sat idly toying with the cool glass and looking at the matted green creepers which covered the whole wall of the patio, he realized suddenly he must know more about Kitty. Must, in fact, know all about her. He began to understand there would be other phases of his guardianship beside the management and enjoyment of the money. He must watch Kitty as a man might watch the vagaries of the market.

He felt a faint thrill at the prospect. Upon his skill depended his continued possession of her fortune. The train of thought led him to remember the papers in the drawer of his desk. He had meant to remove them last night after he had seen Palling apparently

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looking at that particular place. But after the departure of the others, Fanny had hustled him off to bed. There couldn't be any chance that Palling knew the situation, of course. But the papers would be better in the bedroom wall safe. Plenty of time for his nap afterwards.

He entered the house by a door leading to the rear hall-way. In his slippers, his movements were noiseless on the carpet. As he approached the library, he saw a shadow waver vaguely in the hall's neutral tones and stopped. There were two doors, both open, from which pathways of greyness fell across the hall carpet. One opened from the dining-room where he had suffered last night's seizure. The other, a little farther along, was the library entrance. The shadow wavered again. He was sure of it now. Someone was in the library.

He advanced with increased caution, although he was more than half certain it was Fanny Smallbone engaged upon some trifling household task. On the other hand —— He stopped suddenly at the door and stared into the eyes of Dr. Palling.

If the intruder was taken by surprise, Joseph Sleep could see no trace of it in his face. The fellow was in the middle, half-way to the desk, but facing the library door. Sleep had a fleeting impression he was not leaving the room, but merely crossing to the hall door to see if he was free of spying eyes. As a precaution before beginning a thorough search, it was admirable.

Sleep felt a sudden rush of anger which he carefully concealed, although there was no friendliness in his eyes as he stared at Palling. The doctor smiled and came forward.

"Ah, there you are, Joseph. I came looking for you. How'd you sleep last night?"

Sleep looked at him for a moment. Then he answered drily. "Well enough. What are you doing in my library?"

"Eh? Oh, I rang the bell but nobody answered so I walked in. I expected you'd be asleep. You ought to be at this time you know. How's your pulse?"

Indifferently Sleep surrendered a thin wrist. The explanation for his presence in the library didn't altogether satisfy him, although it was reasonable. He wished the fellow would shut up and not rattle away through all the conversational tricks of the physician. What had he eaten for breakfast? Had he had a nap this morning? He'd send in a small bottle of tonic presently. Just a little something to tone up heart and digestion. Sleep nodded, trying to keep any sign of irritation out of his manner.

"All right, all right, Palling. I'm not going to die yet awhile. One death at a time is enough in the street, isn't it?"

Palling was checked. He glanced at Sleep with a sudden change of expression. "I suppose you mean —— ?"

"The Reckon woman, of course," Sleep snapped. "What happened to her?"

"I wasn't surprised, really. The heart took to acting up, and — well — you know."

Sleep interrupted irritably. "I suppose you're trying to tell me I'm in the same boat? Don't be too sure of that, Palling. I'll stay around for a bit. When'd she die?"

Palling shrugged. "Some time in the night. Can't say exactly. You mustn't distress

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yourself about it —— "

"Don't be an ass, Palling. I'm too old to be afraid. Only the young take death seriously. I've had too long to get accustomed to the idea. Now run along, will you?"

"Of course. Glad to see you so brisk. Don't overdo it. Get plenty of rest."

Sleep let him get almost through the arch before he brought him up with a question.

"What time did you say Sarah Reckon died?"

Palling turned slowly, his face expressionless. "I didn't say, Joseph. I was called in this morning about ten. I should say she'd been dead since about the middle of the night. Why?"

"You don't suppose she was dead last night when you and Breene ran out on my party, do you?"

Sleep scarcely knew why he had asked the question. It has just popped into his head and he let it out with some vague idea of emphasizing his annoyance at the way Palling had left them last night. He was struck now with the sudden curious wariness which had come into Palling's face. The urbane doctor-and-patient was gone. Only for a moment. Then Palling smiled. "I hardly think she died quite that early. You see, *rigor mortis* ——"

Sleep stopped him impatiently. "Never mind all the nasty details. I'm not accusing you of murdering the woman."

Palling's face flushed violently. "*Are* you?" he asked.

It was Sleep's turn to be surprised. He suddenly broke into cackling laughter. "Don't be ridiculous. Now get out or I'll call Fanny and turn her loose on you."

Without answering, Palling turned on his heel. Sleep remained motionless until he heard the front door close. Then he crossed to the window and watched the doctor go down the path and vanish around a turn. He was puzzled at the way his remark had been taken.

He turned back to the desk, his mind shifting again to the doctor's excuse for being in the library. He examined the drawer, peering at the woodwork around the lock. It was unmarked, of course. He hadn't really expected to find it otherwise. There was no reason to suspect Palling or anyone else knew about the contents. He opened it, finding the papers just as he had left them several weeks ago. He examined each one with care. When he was satisfied he placed them in his pocket and locked the drawer. They would certainly be better in his bedroom wall-safe.

He felt a sudden desire to get out of the house and into Poldrate Street. He would just have time before lunch was ready.

There was no one in sight when he emerged from the shelter of his garden. He walked to the end of the street and turned, lingering for a moment before the house of Sarah Reckon. He hoped she hadn't suffered.

As he resumed his walk, he saw the elder Gordon, accompanied by his son, emerge from the Gordon gate and turn away from him. He quickened his pace and overtook

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the pair as they were passing the Palling gate. They both stopped and the elder Gordon touched his hat.

"Look here, Gordon, I'm afraid you've been neglecting my garden lately."

The gardener looked offended. "That's not fair, Mr. Sleep. I give it all the time ——"

Sleep interrupted. "All the time you have left from your other jobs. I know you're kept very busy, but I think when you turn on the water in Mr. Breene's garden and Dr. Palling's, you might do the same in mine. Last night, for instance. It doesn't take long to turn a master-tap."

"But, Mr. Sleep, I didn't water last night. I was busy raking Mr. Breene's parking lot until after ten. Then I went straight home."

Young Gordon nodded. "That's right. I was round with my magazines last night. Mrs. Reckon's garden was the only one watered an' she did it herself, I guess."

"What's that?" Sleep stared at the boy sharply. "You're positive?"

"Sure, Mr. Sleep. I sold a magazine to Mrs. Reckon about ten o'clock. Her hose had been running because I could smell the dampness."

Sleep's mind was moving rapidly, searching for questions and answers. He recalled the water-drops on the trousers of his two male guests. If there had been no water in the other gardens, then Breene and Palling must have been in Sarah Reckon's garden. That was the only place they could have got wet. He plied the pair with questions until the elder Gordon became a little surly. While he was talking, Sleep was conscious of the approach of a stranger. He turned to face a bearded man with a powerfully-built body. Young Gordon greeted the man eagerly.

"Hello, Highway," he said. "My dog's all right. I fed him the way you said."

The bearded man nodded and smiled. Sleep was sorry to hear the boy's dog was back. He'd hoped the beast was through breaking down things in his garden. "Your dog back?" he asked sourly. "Where's he been?"

"Search me, Mr. Sleep. He was awful bad when he showed up a couple of hours ago, but I did what Highway told me. I guess you know all about dogs, don't you, Highway?"

Sleep noticed the admiration in the boy's eyes.

"Someone visiting you, 'Face'?" he asked, condescending to use the boy's nickname.

"Face" Gordon shook his head. "He's Jimmie Lane's friend. Highway's a tramp," he said triumphantly.

"What?" Joseph Sleep could scarcely believe his ears. He stared at the bearded man who seemed undisturbed. He was tamping his pipe with his fore-finger.

"If staying out of cities and wandering the public roads makes a tramp, I suppose that's what I am," he said placidly. He looked at Joseph Sleep and smiled pleasantly. "I pay my way, Mr. Sleep."

Sleep felt a slight embarrassment. How had the fellow known that was in his mind?

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He nodded brusquely. "Oh yes, quite so. Well, Gordon, sorry. Apparently you weren't neglecting my garden any more than the others." That'll hold him, he thought. With a stiff bow, he turned away, going towards his own gate. He had taken only a step or two before he was conscious there was another figure between him and the tall pillars. He had been too concerned with the impression he was making on Gordon to notice where the figure had come from, but it seemed to have emerged from Joseph Sleep's own premises. He couldn't be sure. He *might* have come from Breene's place. As he advanced he recognized young Lane. The suspicion he had come from his garden increased as he saw the fighter hesitate at the sight of him. It was only for a second, however. They came together rapidly. Powerful brute, Sleep thought. The young fellow nodded. "How are you, Mr. Sleep?"

Sleep answered stiffly. "Very well, thanks." He hesitated. "Sorry about your aunt ——"

Young Lane muttered "Thanks" and went by without stopping. As he did ,Sleep realized he was trying to conceal something in his hand. He caught a glimpse of zinnias and thought they might have come from his own garden, although there were some in Breene's place. His earlier suspicion Lane had been trespassing was confirmed. Could it be that the boy had the same thieving traits as his aunt? Fancy going into his garden in broad daylight to steal flowers.

For no apparent reason, Joseph Sleep suddenly thought of Kitty. He remembered the animal heat and turmoil of her young body when he had come upon her suddenly in the garden. An overwhelming conviction came to him that she had walked straight from Lane's arms when she heard him call. Could it be possible he had witnessed something he had not seen for nearly half a century, the spectacle of a young girl recovering from the throes of carnal passion? Lane had got home only this morning. The thing was impossible. And yet . . . His lips tightened ominously as he walked up the garden path. He heard Fanny calling his name and the sound cut short his speculations. She was standing on the front steps, grumbling because he had kept an omelet waiting.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE HALLWAY in Mafia Breene's house was in twilight as he came silently from the rear. It was early afternoon, but the doors leading into the hall were all closed and only a vague glimmer of light drifted through the coloured glasses around the front door.

Breene paused before the grandfather clock, listening intently. There was no sound in the old house, except the slow beat of the clock. Cora was silent in the kitchen. Nothing stirred behind the closed door at the far end of the hall where He

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lay. Satisfied he was unobserved, Breene crossed hurriedly to the little sitting-room where Sarah Reckon had hidden. With his key, he unlocked the door into the room beyond and pushed it open. A strong odour of dog assailed him, making him curse silently. He stepped inside, closed the door and locked it.

The room was just as they had left it last night when they carried out the loose body of Sarah Reckon. He glanced from the little marble-topped table with the drainage basin underneath to the rubber tubes thrown on the floor. He must get that mess out of here before Cora came spying on him. The moment he left this room unlocked, she'd be in like a hound dog. He knew she was burning with curiosity to know what they'd been up to in here. At that, it was better to risk her spying than Monk down in the undertaking rooms. Monk had access to the funeral quarters at all hours and might have picked the lock to any room they chose.

Cora was bad enough, but at least she didn't dare pick locks. He was glad it was Sarah Reckon and not Cora who had seen the dog lying on the table with that curious arrangement of pipes, a dog dead and yet not dead. He paused now, considering the perfection of the thing they had proved, that a dog could lie for a whole week, dead to all appearances, yet be revived and turned loose, not much the worse, apparently, for its experience. A little thinner, wobbly on its legs, but nothing a few days of regular meals and exercise wouldn't put right. That incision in the dog's chest was rather bad, but thank heaven the animal couldn't talk.

Gathering up the tubes and drainage basin his mind was busy with the application of their plan to its objective. The room smelled vilely, he thought. He crossed to the windows and drew the heavy curtains. Then he pushed open the windows, letting in a flood of fresh air. From where he stood, he could look through a tangle of shrubbery to the garden wall which divided his property from the cemetery beyond. The geography was perfect. There wasn't another place in the city so well arranged for their plan. It was a daring idea, too daring, perhaps. A little qualm of fear shook his knees for a second, but he braced himself. What could go wrong with it? Once let him get the girl into his possession and things would follow the usual routine. Sickness, death, Palling's certificate, burial permit and burial. That would end matters so far as the authorities were concerned. But it would only begin them for Palling and himself. It was all very simple. He wondered if it wasn't just a little *too* simple.

Fortunately for their plan there was nothing against either Palling or himself. Twenty years in business as an undertaker in Los Angeles. He was known as a reliable if somewhat unsuccessful man.

In his father's day, back in Illinois, when there were fewer undertakers and expenses nothing like as ruinous, undertakers all over the country had averaged nearly two hundred funerals yearly. Now if they averaged fifty they did well as could be expected. With the average city funeral costing about two hundred and fifty dollars, the best a man could make for himself today was about twenty-five per cent. Out of that he had to live and pay running expenses. Nothing like a goldmine in that, Breene

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thought bitterly.

It was fortunate he could do his own embalming so he didn't have to keep a regular man. That was twenty-five a week he was able to save.

Breene suddenly realized the electric light was still burning. No need for that with daylight in the room. He switched it off. Pennies could be frittered away if you didn't watch things like that. He hoped this scheme of Palling's would work out successfully. He didn't know how much he was going to get. Palling had been a bit vague about that. Said he didn't know exactly how much old man Sleep had so he couldn't divide until they put the pressure on. He hoped to get quite a few thousand, anyway.

With a last look around to make sure he had collected everything, he pushed the table on its rubber-tyred wheels towards the door. When it was unlocked he tip-toed to the hall to make sure it was still deserted. He hoped to be able to get the table down into the undertaking quarters without being seen by Cora.

Satisfied the hall was clear, he returned for the table and started his journey. Almost at the end of the hall, he paused outside the door of the room where He lived, if such a word could be applied to the existence which went on behind those walls. There was no sound. He must be asleep, Breene thought, for the faint animal breathing which distinguished His waking hours was inaudible. Cora must be in some distant part of the house. Satisfied, Breene went on to the door at the end of the hall. A short flight of steps dropped to the underground corridor which connected house and funeral establishment on Washington Street. Carrying the table, Breene went through the door and started down the steps.

Shoving the table, he walked to the end of the passage where a door gave entrance to the preparation room of his establishment. He left the table behind and went in, expecting to find his apprentice there, but the room was deserted except for the still form of Sarah Reckon on the work-table. There was a shaded light on one side. He couldn't see the necessity for the light himself, but he was never able to persuade Monk to leave bodies in darkness. Wasn't decent, the apprentice said. It was a queer idea and it ran into a dollar or two every month, but Breene felt he had to put up with it. Monk still had nearly six months of his two-year apprenticeship to serve.

After that he'd have to get another apprentice, and you never knew how a new man would turn out. Twenty-five dollars a month with room and sometimes board wasn't good enough for these young whipper-snappers nowadays. They were always asking more. Monk wasn't demanding in that respect.

He crossed to the table and drew back the sheet, revealing the placid features of the woman who had invaded his house last night. He was anxious to examine the place in her hair where Palling had inserted his needle with the full charge of insulin.

He reached up for the overhead travelling light, and drew it closer. Then he parted the brown hair with its frequent strands of white. There was only the tiniest mark where the needle had gone in and you couldn't see it unless you knew where to look. Wonderful, he thought. A mark you couldn't see, a fluid that left no trace. They had

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only to give the dose of chloroform first and then the insulin. Long before the chloroform wore off, she succumbed to the insulin, sitting quietly in a chair in her own kitchen.

After he had removed the woman's clothing, he glanced at his watch. Nearly three o'clock. He would have to hurry.

As he proceeded with his task of arterial embalming, long familiarity allowing him to follow each operation almost mechanically, he let his mind run along in more pleasing channels. He would do great things when Palling's scheme had borne fruit. He'd let his present lease run out and take over a bigger place in the heart of the fashionable district. He could put twenty thousand into it, if his share ran to that. Only the very best equipment. Then watch him. He'd put on such a show he'd be the envy of every high-class mortician in the business.

He was glad he'd been able to persuade Lane to let them have the funeral tomorrow morning. The sooner the better under the circumstances. His mind came around to the business of the scissors in the garden. Palling was a fool to have made an issue of it. He should have realized the tramp was only grabbing for something he thought might bring a few cents in a pawn-shop. But Palling had to get on his high horse and draw attention to himself. Breene was anxious to know what had happened after he turned the corner. Unconsciously, he hurried.

He completed his task and was just about to go into the store-room for the modest casket selected to hold Sarah Reckon, when Monk came in with a message. Someone wanted him on the 'phone, he said. It was Union headquarters calling. "It's about Gordon."

"I suppose he hasn't paid his dues," Breene snapped, washing his hands. He used Gordon as his driver when the hearse was necessary. As a driver, he'd been forced to join the drivers' union.

He left the preparation-room and walked along the corridor to the little office behind the slumber-room where he kept his desk. The telephone receiver dangled from the wall-'phone. As he crossed, he noticed a movement behind the desk and "Face" Gordon stood up. "Hello, Mr. Breene," he said grinning.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Breene growled. He picked up the receiver. "Hello."

A tired masculine voice at the other end drawled a threat. Unless his driver complied with union rules at once, Breene's business would be picketed.

"How much does he owe? All right. I'll send it if you let me have the bill." He hung up and turned to scowl at young Gordon. "Why doesn't that old man of yours pay his union dues?" he snapped. "Tell him I'll fire him if I have another complaint."

"I'll tell him, Mr. Breene. Everybody's riding him these days, it seems like."

"Yeah? Who else?"

"Mr. Sleep was after him just now for not watering his garden last night. Said he did yours and Dr. Palling's. I told Mr. Sleep he was wrong 'cause I knew my dad

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hadn't watered any of the lawns last night."

Breene stared at the boy. "Why was Sleep so sure your father had watered the other lawns?"

"Search me, Mr. Breene. Say, I almost forgot. Mrs. Palling sent me in with a message. She's giving a party tonight an' she wants you to be sure an' come."

"All right."

Breene watched the boy as he walked along the corridor towards the front door. He stopped to stare into the slumber-room and then went on. He was always prowling about, Breene thought. This wasn't the first time he'd let slip a bit of useful information. So Sleep had noticed the drops of water on their trousers and remembered them. Drops they'd got when they went through Sarah Reckon's garden. The crafty old devil. What else had Sleep found out? Could he have discovered Sarah Reckon's garden had been watered last night and suspect they had been in it?

CHAPTER TWELVE

DR. PALLING called the little room off the front hall his consultation-room, but it was rarely used for that purpose because patients seldom found their way into Poldrate Street. Among the miscellany time had gathered in its crowded space was an exhibit which fascinated Violet Palling. She never failed to pause before the human skeleton which dangled at the end of a spring from a kind of steel gibbet erected on a movable platform. Cunningly wired, so that all the joints moved easily through the full compass, the skeleton was rarely quite motionless. The overhead spring, fastened to a staple let into the skull, was very sensitive. The skeleton responded to the slightest tremor communicated from the floor and with the tips of its toes just touching the platform of its stand, danced delicately, almost mincingly upon occasion.

Violet, entering the consultation-room in search of pencil and paper, paused before the skeleton. She wanted to make a list of things required for her party. But the fascination of the dainty dancer stopped her. She stood staring at the naked thing, its bones the colour of old ivory. With the tip of her finger she set it dancing. As it nodded and dipped she found her own shoulders keeping time with its movements. She wondered what its story might be, what thrills of passion had trembled there among those bones when the spaces were filled with sentience. She crossed to Palling's desk and switched on the lamp. Like most rooms in the house, particularly the lower floor, the consultation-room was perpetually in twilight.

Hastily she made out her list of things required for the evening. She wanted something which would appeal to each of the men present. It was important they should all be pleased with the party. She wrote a long list of necessities, tasty tid-bits to be

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used in preparation of *hors d'œuvres* which she knew were thirst provocatives.

Satisfied, she turned out the light and crossed the room. She flicked the patient skeleton and went on, leaving it to perform its dainty, pathetic dance alone.

The afternoon had reached that least inspiring time when dust dances in every ray of sunlight, when leaf and blade droop under the steady heat. Under the heavy shade of palm and pepper tree, Violet walked slowly towards the gate. She looked cool and serene, almost stately, in the long lines of an afternoon sporting frock with a skirt buttoned from belt to bottom down the side. In the shadows of the garden she seemed discreetly clothed. It was not until she passed the gate into the brightness of Poldrate that an observer, had there been one, might have decided she was completely nude under the thin summer material.

But the street was empty through its short length. Ordinarily, Violet would have left by the back gate and gone down the alley. But she had a purpose which led her to take the other route. She was sure of her guests with one exception. Jimmie Lane was the question mark, and she wanted him more than all the others. If he happened to be visible in his garden, that would make it easier. If not, she intended to go in.

She altered her plan without change in her leisurely pace as she saw "Face" Gordon round the corner from Happen Street. A touch of caution told her not to let the boy see her enter the Reckon garden. She had managed to patch up a feud of long standing with him that very day, and had bribed him into acting as messenger-boy for her party invitations.

Violet was not without some suspicion that his sudden willingness to be friendly was a ripening appreciation of her womanhood. Lately she had seen him eyeing her as she walked by, and had taken pains to accentuate the provocative curves of her beautiful body. So today, when she smiled and beckoned, he had come eagerly enough. He was a big boy, she thought, watching him draw closer now. A big boy and well worth cultivating.

"I gave your messages as you said, Mrs. Palling. I just came from Mr. Breene."

Violet smiled with slow intimacy. "What did Mr. Breene say?"

"Face" Gordon shook his head. "Nothing much. He seemed upset about something."

So even the boy had noticed it. She smiled and slipped her arm through his, gently turning him around. "Walk along with me, 'Face'. I'm going shopping. Want to help carry my things?" Her slender fingers pressed the boy's arm with intimate suggestion.

"Sure, Mrs. Palling. I'd like to." He flushed with excitement.

"Why do you call me that, 'Face'?" She smiled into the puzzled eyes which were almost on a level with her own. "Call me Violet. Would you like to?"

"Would I? Gee, that would be swell."

Together they walked to Washington. It seemed strange and noisy after the quiet of Poldrate. She liked going to the market, three blocks along the boulevard.

"Face" walked beside her as she made her purchases, carrying a wicker basket

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provided by the management. When one basket was filled, he picked up another. She asked his advice about several things, and soon they were chatting merrily. Violet treated him like a man. Concealed by lofty stands from other shoppers, she whispered in his ear, letting the fragrance of hair and person do their work. She foresaw the possibility of being able to use this boy, this big boy, in many ways.

There was something else, too. That unexplained remark about Breene being upset. She wanted to know what it was and she had a conviction "Face" could tell her.

Most of the order was to be delivered, but she chose to bind "Face" firmly to herself by letting him carry home some of the lighter parcels. She asked him to go ahead while she stopped in a beauty parlour to have her hair dressed. She could see the boy was utterly oblivious of the crowds as they walked along the sun-swept pavement. He kept very close, touching her when he could and using her name with relish.

Casually she revived the subject of Breene's apparent worry. What did "Face" think was the matter? It was not long before he was telling her about Joseph Sleep's indignation because his garden hadn't been watered. Vividly, Violet remembered the old man's remark when he saw the waterdrops on the trousers of the two men as they entered his dining-room. She learned that the Reckon garden was the only one watered, and felt a strange sense of uneasiness as she realized the two men must have visited it during their absence from Joseph Sleep's house. What possible reason could they have had for going there? Sarah Reckon had died last night, some time in the hours between sundown and sunrise. She remembered Ivar's story about a patient in Eighteenth Street. Suppose that was a lie and there hadn't been any patient? Then what were they doing during that time?

At the door of the beauty salon she paused, smiling. "It's only my hair," she said.

He glanced at it. "You're not going to have one of those greasy, primped things, are you?" he asked. "They always look as if they'd been clopped up with dirty butter."

Violet laughed. "I never let the girl do anything but give it a thorough brushing."

The boy was obviously relieved. He was already taking an interest, a personal interest, in how she did things. He looked, she thought, as if he'd like to touch her hair.

"Would you like to brush my hair for me?" she asked softly. The expression in his eyes was sufficient answer. Violet smiled. "One night, when the doctor goes out, I'll let you know. You can come in and brush it before I go to bed. Leave the things on the kitchen table. 'Bye, 'Face'."

The beauty parlour was mainly a ruse to get rid of him. She didn't want to hurt his vanity by letting him see her talking to Jimmie Lane, and she must make sure of the fighter's presence at the party. It never occurred to her that he would feel sufficiently depressed over his aunt's death to stay away. After what had happened in the garden, she would have been very much surprised at such hypocrisy. To her way of thinking, any man would be counting the moments, as she was, until they were together again.

As she relaxed under the ministrations of the girl who brushed her hair, she

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wondered about the other women in the shop. What would they say if they knew her secret? Her mind went back to the moments in the garden with Jimmie, and forward to the evening ahead. An electric clock spoke the hour, warning her she must hurry. Impatiently she paid for her service and went out into the street. All the way back to Happen Street she was wondering what she would do if unable to find Jimmie Lane.

From Happen she entered the alley behind the Reckon garden. There was less chance of anyone seeing her going into Jimmie's place that way.

Luck was with her. The lane was deserted and the Reckon gate unfastened. Once inside the garden, she was hidden by the same dense forestry that filled her own.

Noiselessly she moved along the path, eyes and ears alert. Presently she heard a man's voice just beyond the curving line of hedge. She stopped, a smile on her lips. Jimmie's voice. "Let her go," he said. A sudden splash of water followed. She leaned forward and peered through the leaves at a small enclosed patch of sunlit lawn. In the centre stood a man Violet had never seen, a vigorous man of fifty with a brown beard, slightly streaked with grey. He held a hose from which water rushed in a hissing stream. Twenty feet away stood Jimmie, clad only in fighting trunks. The water battered against his hard flesh with the brittle sound of egg-shells breaking.

Violet watched, her lips parted, eyes intense. She experienced something of the passion Lane had known earlier in the day when he saw her in the pool. She gloated over the broad shoulders, the sloping muscles from the base of his ears to shoulders, sign of a vicious hitter, she knew. The barrel-like chest grew red under the battery of water. He swayed his narrow hips, letting the spear-head of water smash itself against his body with a strong, rude relish.

Presently the bearded man threw down the hose. It writhed like a gigantic serpent, spitting water in all directions, while the man crossed to a tap and turned it off. Then he went through the shrubbery, disappearing in the direction of the house. Jimmie stood in the sunlight, drying himself with an enormous towel, enjoying the vigorous friction. Violet watched, loath to betray her presence. It was not until he threw the towel over a bush and picked up a faded dressing-gown that she spoke.

"Jimmie."

Her voice barely carried, but he turned as if he had been struck from behind, staring towards the leafy barrier. Violet leaned partly through the branches, smiling. Jimmie grinned sheepishly. "What the devil are you doing in here, Violet?"

"Seeing *you*, beautiful." She thrust a hand through the leaves. Almost roughly he shoved her back. "For God's sake don't let Highway see you."

"Are you coming tonight?"

"Tonight? Oh yes, if I can."

"You've got to come, Jimmie. I'm giving the party for you."

"Well, under the circumstances, I shouldn't, you know."

"Promise." She started through the bushes. Jimmie shoved her back nervously.

"All right. I promise."

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"That's all I wanted." Swiftly she slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Then, with a mocking wave, she fled along the path towards the gate.

Violet was breathing a little excitedly and smiling when she entered her own garden. Life was worth while again, she felt. A lover worth all the others put together, young, savage, unattached.

She entered the house by the kitchen door. Her purchases had all been delivered. They lay on the kitchen table, a sizeable pile. She suddenly remembered with dismay she was without a maid and must do all the work herself.

It was necessary to arrange her time and do the thing methodically. There was no clock in the kitchen so she walked through the pantry into the dining-room and then into the rear of the hall. There was a clock in the consultation-room. As she moved noiselessly over the carpet, she heard voices and stopped. Breene and Palling were in the consultation-room. She suddenly remembered her curious suspicion that the two men had been in Sarah Reckon's garden.

She was too far down the hall to distinguish words, so she crept closer. Breene's voice had an urgency which made her all the more anxious to understand what he was saying.

"I tell you, Palling, the old fool suspects something. Why else would he be asking crazy questions about the gardens?"

Palling's voice was quiet. "Keep your hair on, Mafia. What if he is? I'll go to work on the girl tonight. Once we've got her, we'll muzzle Sleep for good."

Breene's voice was still off-key. "I tell you, Palling, I'm scared. Can't we quit now, before it's too late?"

"Don't be a damned fool. Sleep has the money and all we've got to do is move in. You don't think I'll quit now, after — after last night?"

"I suppose not. Not that anyone's likely to find out about that, unless Sleep does."

There was a scraping of chairs and footsteps. Caught by surprise, Violet could not escape. She was able to retreat backwards only a dozen steps before they came into the hall and saw her. But by that time she was again advancing, a careless smile on her face. The men stopped, obviously startled.

"Hello, Mafia," she said carelessly. "Are you coming to my party tonight?"

She saw relief come into both faces. Breene nodded. "Oh, sure. We're getting very gay, aren't we?"

"Then perhaps you won't mind lending me Cora. I've no maid, you know."

"Cora? Yes, if she'll come. What time do you want her?"

"Promise her a drink and she'll come. Make it as early as she can get here."

With a wave, she turned and went up the stairway to the second floor. She was conscious of eyes watching until she disappeared. She hurried into the front bedroom where the windows were directly over the main entrance. The two men stood below on the veranda. Their words came up the front of the house as if over a telephone wire.

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"Do you think she heard, Palling?"

"No. She just came down the hall."

Breene was not satisfied. "But suppose she *did?*"

"She'll get what the Reckon woman got if she interferes. For God's sake, Breene, stop trying to scare yourself to death."

She heard Breene's steps on the garden path. Then she turned and fled. As she crossed the room, she saw her white face reflected in the mirror.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

8 p.m. to 8.30 p.m.

THE CLOCK IN THE MAIN HALL of Mafia Breene's house tolled eight brassy notes. Standing before the mirror in her bedroom at the back of the house on the ground floor, Cora Blessington counted them. When the last faint tone died away she continued pinning the white starched collar to her black dress. Broodingly she examined herself in the mirror, turning slowly. The massive face and columnar throat gleamed in the electric light like something carved in ebony. Satisfied, she crossed the room and passed through a door. The second room was small, sparsely furnished, dimly lighted. One table, a chair and a huge bed. In the bed lay a figure so tiny it scarcely lifted the covers above the level. The head on the pillows was, if anything, larger than Cora's. Looking at it, an observer might have wondered how the stem-like neck could lift so great a weight. Despite his natural wonder, he might have been shocked to learn it never had. In all His life He had never stood unaided.

It was part of the tragic destiny Fate had decreed for Cora's off-spring that he should go through life without a name. Never having been christened and never named, she and others thought of the unfortunate creature as a life without a personality, a responsibility rather than an entity. It was only natural under these circumstances that in the course of time they spoke of Cora's child simply as Him or He, and capitalized the thought.

As Cora approached, the enormous head turned on the pillows. There was a movement in the face itself as the dull eyes rolled in her direction. A faint sound, betokening pleasure was heard. While she remained in the room the droning murmur continued to pour from the thick lips.

It was an accompaniment to the low melody which Cora hummed as she straightened the pillow and coverlets. Before she finished, she thrust her powerful hand far under the mattress, feeling the thick bundle of currency hidden there. The dull eyes showed increased excitement and the strange animal mumbling grew slightly louder. Cora knew it was His method of telling her the money was safe. It was His one interest in life. Somehow she had managed to convey to Him an understanding that the

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bundle was important and that His constant presence was necessary as a guard. Distrust of banks had led Cora to use this hiding-place exclusively. There were more than three thousand dollars in the package. She worried, sometimes, over the problem of investing it so that He would be cared for if anything happened to her.

When she had finished straightening the covers, she stroked His head gently. "Jus' you lie still, honey," she said soothingly. "Yo ma's goin' out fo' a bit. I'll be back." The eyes followed her as she crossed to the door.

The prospect ahead was not particularly pleasing. She had almost rebelled when Breene told her she was wanted in the Palling house for the evening. Plodding along Poldrate Street, she was grimly determined to obtain payment for her time.

The kitchen door was unlocked. She went inside and found the place deserted. As she unrolled the apron with its stiffly starched strings and placed it precisely in the centre of her enormous abdomen, she saw the parcels and bottles on the table. There were lots of the latter, she noted with mounting enthusiasm.

As she opened a package of California camembert cheese, there was a slight swishing sound of beads, and Violet came in. She was wearing a plum-coloured dress which set off the long lines of her figure. Her arms were bare to the shoulders where a narrow strap of brilliants held the gown in place. It was cut very low so that the rounded forms of her breasts showed plainly.

" 'Evening, ma'am." Cora spoke in her throaty voice.

Violet Palling came forward and began opening parcels. "'Evening, Cora. Nice of you to come. You'll find everything here or in the ice-box. We'll have supper about eleven."

"Yes, ma'am. And the likkah, ma'am?"

"Liquor? Oh, well, you might bring in some drinks when they arrive."

"Yes, ma'am. I sho will, ma'am."

She watched Violet Palling turn and go out, her movements slow and insolent. Six people. Whisky-and-soda. You *might* bring in some drinks when they arrive. Cora chuckled. She had a pretty good idea what kind of a row would result if she *didn't* bring in some drinks. And then more drinks.

8.30 p.m. to 9 p.m.

As Violet went into the hall, she heard Breene's voice in the consultation-room and stopped, nervously remembering the incident of the afternoon. She could see Breene's shadow on the hall carpet. She saw him point to something, evidently the skeleton. "Where'd you get this thing, Ivar?"

Palling answered carelessly, "Oh, that? That's my first wife."

Breene laughed. "It could be," he said. "You *could* do it, you know. You could put the bones right out on display like that, too. Simpler than the way we're doing it, don't you think?"

There was a sudden noise in the room and a flurry of shadows. It looked as if

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Palling had shoved Breene's head back. She heard Ivar speaking in a low voice. "*Will* you shut up, you damned fool?" A panic made Violet shiver. She hadn't quite recovered from the afternoon incident and now here was the same thing being banged in her face again. It was because of that she was carrying the thirty-eight strapped to her left leg. It was a terrible nuisance. It felt hard and clumsy, but she didn't know how else to keep it handy. She had intended to carry the little gun, but when she found the shells had been replaced with blanks, it scared her even worse. It made her think Palling was planning something against her. She was afraid to take the little gun after that because if Ivar missed it he would know she was expecting something. She realized she couldn't go on carrying the heavy gun all evening.

She couldn't get away with it a second time if they caught her here in the front hall listening. They hadn't been sure then, but it couldn't happen again. It frightened her because she hadn't been able to readjust her ideas to what she had realized this afternoon. All along she had always thought of herself as the stronger of the two. Now, suddenly, she realized Ivar was far more dangerous than she had thought. She tried not to think about it, but there could be no doubt Sarah Reckon's death had been brought about by the two men. And the horrible thing about it seemed to be that she was dead because she had "interfered." Interfered in what? Something concerning Kitty apparently. And if Palling caught her interfering, he was prepared to give her the same he had given Sarah Reckon.

The jangle of the bell in the kitchen warned her someone was at the front door. Palling came into the hall, but fortunately he was headed the other way. She waited until he had opened the door, revealing Joseph Sleep and Kitty, before coming forward. Sleep, as she expected, was wearing a dinner jacket and had come without a hat. Kitty was in evening gown of ivory satin. It set off the red hair like a rose on snow. Violet realized suddenly she had made a mistake in bringing this vivid creature into the same house where she expected Jimmie Lane. Why the devil hadn't she thought of that? Her heart quickened with jealousy. Why had she invited any of them, she wondered. She could have got Jimmie alone without all this trouble. But the party had been set in motion before she met him in the garden. Well, it was too late for that. They were coming for a party and she'd give them one. But just let that red-haired wench look at Jimmie and she'd wish heaven had been good and let her die in the cradle.

Breene joined them in the hall and they all went into the drawing-room together. She saw Ivar take Kitty's arm and lead her to a chair beside one of them. Sleep went at once to his usual place, a spacious leather chair close to the empty fireplace.

She excused herself and left them together. She had suddenly remembered Cora alone with the bottles. In the hall she remembered the front door light again and went forward to the switch. Perhaps Jimmie Lane was somewhere in the garden. They might have a few moments together. She went outside and looked. There was no sign of Jimmie. She wondered if she dared go looking for him. She suddenly felt the gun

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around her leg was an intolerable nuisance. With a quick movement she lifted her skirt, unfastened the sheath and thrust the gun into the tangle of vines, and went on until she was able to see the front gate.

The moon was rising beyond the houses, but so far Poldrate lay in shadow. She stepped on to the pavement, looking towards the Reckon garden. There was no one in sight. It was annoying of Jimmie. They might have had five minutes together, and you can do a great deal in five minutes.

There was a sound behind, and she turned, a queer little shiver in her hair. A man was coming out of the Sleep garden. She heard a low whistled melody and recognized Jimmie's stride. What was he doing in Joseph Sleep's garden? What else but looking for Kitty McKay! But how could he have met her? she suddenly recalled his escape over the garden wall. Intuitively she knew he must have met the red-head then. The thought made her press her nails sharply into the palms of her hands.

As he came through the gate, he stopped and struck a match for a cigarette. In the light he saw her and stared.

"Violet," he said, "what's the idea?"

"Put out that light," she whispered, and when the dark shut them in again, moved closer. Very soon, she would know if Kitty had got him. Her arms went around his hips under his coat. He was almost as slender there as a young girl, she thought. But so much stronger. "They won't miss me for five minutes, Jimmie. Kiss me."

She couldn't quite understand how he managed it, but somehow her arms were empty. He had swayed sideways and slipped clear without effort. The next moment he had her arm and they were walking along the path. "Now now, Violet. I'd wreck that dress of yours." She wanted to tear her arm free, strike him across the face. She knew now that he'd met Kitty when he went over the garden wall. But it wouldn't do to make a scene. If she did, he'd probably go home and she'd lose him altogether.

"You act as if you're afraid of me," she taunted.

"Sure, I'm afraid. You're a wild-cat."

They came in sight of the porch-light. "You go on ahead," he ordered. "It won't do for us to come in together."

With a quick movement she pulled him back around the bend and kissed him. His slight withdrawal stopped when he realized there was nothing passionate in the caress. Purposely she made it gentle so that he would not resist. Then without warning, she dropped her lips to his white shirt front. Her teeth, sharp as a weasel's, sank into his flesh. She felt the skin give under that slashing attack. He swore suddenly and his broad hands hurled her back, but she was already going away and managed to keep her balance. In the dark she laughed.

"What can your Kitty give you *I* can't?" she mocked. She slipped past him suddenly. "Don't get lost," she whispered.

Without thinking, she followed the side path leading to the kitchen door. She tore her handkerchief to shreds and left it behind. That damned red-head! He had come to

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her party tonight with nothing else in his thoughts but seeing her.

What was it Ivar and Mafia were up to? They had something in mind about the girl. She was sure of that. She hoped savagely it was what she suspected. If only they'd ask her help, how willingly she'd give it. She wished it was Kitty who was lying in Sarah Reckon's place in Mafia Breene's slumber-room tonight. She and Mafia could have gone, hand in hand, and gloated over her. How she could love the man who gave her joy like that!

She approached the kitchen door with her usual silence. Through the screen she saw Cora preparing a generous glass of whisky-and-soda. Cora put down the siphon and reached for the glass.

"I'll take that, Cora," Violet said.

The coloured woman turned with a startled gasp. Her breath, expelled quickly, enveloped Violet in a strong odour of liquor. "Fo' Gawd's sake, yo sho scared me!"

Violet swallowed the drink at a gulp and held out the glass. "Fill it," she ordered.

"Yes, ma'am." Cora reached with speed and filled it with whisky-and-soda.

Violet drained her glass for a second time without stopping. Then she hurled it across the kitchen where it smashed against the wall. "There's one thing whisky won't kill, Cora, and that's a party. Bring in the drinks."

Then she turned and moved swiftly towards the door.

9 p.m. to 9.30 p.m.

Joseph Sleep sat in his favourite chair in the Palling drawing-room and hated it. He had chosen it because it was the only piece of furniture in which he could be comfortable. He hated it because the leather felt cold through the thin stuff of his trousers.

He heard Kitty laughing and glanced across the room. She was seated on a davenport with Breene. Palling was standing in front, his back to Sleep. Something he had said in that pleasant voice of his had amused her. Sleep was conscious of a curious pang as he observed the slenderness of her figure in its ivory satin.

"You're wrong, Doctor," she said gaily. "This dress didn't cost anything like that. I couldn't afford it."

"What, and you an heiress?" Palling was shocked. Sleep felt a sudden iron hand squeeze his heart. What in fury was the fellow talking about?

Kitty only laughed. "I only wish it was true," she said carelessly.

Sleep suddenly realized it was all in jest, that it couldn't be anything else.

"Kitty will always have plenty while I can afford it," he said formally.

"Nice man," she said, and smiled.

Sleep glanced at Breene and was astonished by the fixed look in the fellow's eyes. He was staring at Kitty as if he was seeing a ghost, a ghost he really *wanted* to see. For the first time Sleep forgot the cold feel of leather through his trousers. He was certain there was something going on between Breene and Palling and that it concerned him, somehow. What had been merely a game of sly curiosity on his part suddenly became

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deadly earnest.

He heard the faint jingle of the door-bell. Palling rose to answer it, but before he could reach the hall, Sleep saw Violet pass the drawing-room door. The way her hips swayed and the boldness of her took a man's breath away. She was a shameless creature, but magnificent, he admitted grudgingly. He wondered who was at the Palling door at this time. Maybe a patient. Maybe another call from the woman in Eighteenth Street. Perhaps it wasn't a cock-and-bull story after all. But even if it's true, he thought, it doesn't explain what they were doing in Sarah Reckon's garden. Sarah Reckon was dead. Very suddenly, now he came to think about it. He hadn't heard anything before about her being subject to heart trouble.

The Palling woman was taking a devilish long time to come back. It couldn't be a patient looking for Palling or she'd have come in to say so. Palling, too, seemed to wonder why she was so long. In the middle of a sentence, he suddenly excused himself and went towards the door.

For some reason he couldn't understand, Sleep found himself leaning forward and watching, as if he expected something to happen. Palling was almost at the doorway when Cora appeared, pushing a tea-wagon on which were bottles and glasses. There was also a huge glass pitcher full of an amber-coloured liquid. Palling stopped to let the wagon through, and then Violet appeared, hanging on the arm of a tall young fellow. Only then did Sleep recognize the young fighter, Reckon's nephew. He was wearing a double-breasted suit of dark blue, and for some reason kept trying to draw the lapels of his coat closer together. It was almost as if he had a soiled shirt and didn't want it to be seen, Sleep thought.

Palling seemed just a little taken aback, but he recovered himself quickly. "Hello, Lane. Glad to see you. Have a drink." He picked up a glass from Cora's wagon and held it out.

"Thanks," Lane murmured.

Violet picked up another glass, touching it to Lane's. "Here's happy nights," she said, and drank.

Palling took Lane's arm and led him away, while Violet's head was tilted. "Come and meet Kitty McKay," he said.

Sleep found himself clutching the arms of his chair, trying to watch the faces of both Kitty and Lane at the same time. He knew now what it was he expected to happen. He remembered his suspicion of the girl in the afternoon, and the curious feeling he had about Lane coming out of his own garden. He was so intent, he forgot Violet and very nearly missed the one face which could tell him something. A sudden movement of the woman's hand caught his eye. He saw she was twisting her glass in both hands with a curious viciousness. Then he looked at her face and saw a jealous woman. Violet Palling was jealous of Jimmie Lane and Kitty.

Suddenly Violet's expression changed. She started laughing. Lane and Kitty were already separated, just as if they were two strangers who had never seen each other

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before. Palling brought the fighter to a chair near Sleep's and shoved him into it with his glass. If there had been anything between him and Kitty they certainly managed to cover it up, Sleep thought.

Cora had gone around the room with her wagon and was now at his elbow. He had intended asking for a whisky-and-soda, but at that moment he saw Kitty had a glass in her hand and was drinking freely while she talked with Breene. Before he knew what he was doing, he had taken a tall tumbler filled with the amber liquid.

Palling was introducing young Lane to him. The fighter was still trying to keep the lapels of his coat turned up above the crease, just as a man does when there is a cold wind blowing. Sleep cut Palling short.

"We've met before," he said dryly. "I ran into him this afternoon just after he'd been robbing my flower garden." He was gratified by the results of that remark. Lane turned red under the sunburn. Before he could speak, Sleep checked him. "It's all right," he said. "We've got so many flowers a few less don't matter." It was on the tip of his tongue to say stealing flowers appeared to be a family failing, when he checked himself and took a drink. The stuff nearly lifted the roof out of his mouth. He gasped, staring at the glass and trying to get his breath. "What's the devil's in that drink?" he asked the room in general.

Over by the piano, Cora heard and smiled at him. "That's a Cora Blessington overdraft, Mista Sleep," she said. "Jus' you drink 'nuff an' you'll be fixed up good."

A comfortable glow spread over his body and communicated something like recklessness to his mind. Young Lane was still trying to apologize about the flowers.

"I wasn't really stealing, Mr. Sleep. I only ——"

Sleep held up his hand abruptly.

"That garden's overrun with flowers," he said. "I've told Gordon a dozen times to root out half of 'em. He's a lazy incompetent." He glanced obliquely at Palling. "Why, only today I spoke to him because he hadn't watered my garden when he did yours and Breene's last night. He said he hadn't touched yours either, but he must have been lying because you had water on your shoes when you came in. Remember?"

He was aware of Breene's eyes fixed on him across the room. That would hold the pair of them, he thought. He took another drink. Jumping sky-rockets, there was *murder* in that stuff. It made him feel great. What was that oversized young fellow talking about now?

"Highway wanted them for some reason or other," Lane said.

"Highway? The tramp?"

"Yeah, I guess that's what you'd call him. He's a pretty decent sort. He did me a good turn or I wouldn't be here now." Lane touched his head.

Palling leaned forward. "I noticed that this morning," he said. He stood up suddenly and began exploring Lane's hair with the tips of his fingers. "You certainly got a nasty crack. Lucky there isn't a fracture. It still looks a little angry. I'll write a prescription you can rub into it. Got a pen, Joseph?"

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"Never carry one, Palling. The nasty things leak."

"Never mind. I'll get one." He went across the room. Passing Kitty, he gestured towards the piano. "Give us some music, Kit; if you can see the keys for dust."

Violet strolled to the piano. As she walked she lifted the bottom of her dress, revealing silk-stockinged legs. She used the dress on the keys like a duster, filling the room with a tripping run of chords. "There you are, red-head," she said insolently. "Get hot." Without waiting, she came across the room towards Lane, smiling. Sleep noticed there were beads of perspiration on the young fellow's forehead. He looked around as if wondering how he could escape the woman, but she gave him no time to rise before she was standing beside his chair. Her hips swayed invitingly as if to music. "Come on," she said. "Let's dance."

An impish thought came into Sleep's brain. "You seem very warm, Lane. Why don't you take off your coat? The ladies won't mind, I'm sure." He saw the quick move to draw the lapels together. He was right, he thought. There's something wrong with his shirt.

Violet leaned forward, her fingers caressing Lane's hair. "Poor Jimmie. What did you do to the man who hit you?"

Lane was sullen. "Nothing," he said. "I was out like a light."

"Bring your head over here," Kitty called. "I want to feel your wound."

Lane started to rise, but Violet's fingers tightened in his hair. He pulled his head away and stood up, but Violet's arms were around him. She began to hum and sway, forcing him to keep time to her music. They seemed to be dancing but their feet remained in the same place. Lane tried to look across at Kitty, but Violet suddenly swung around so his back was towards the other girl. "Come on, Mafia. Get the red-head busy on the piano."

Breene reached for Kitty's hand but she evaded him and got to her feet. As she crossed the room she drained her glass. She was fairly close to Sleep when she finished. "Here, catch," she said, and tossed the glass to Lane. He was forced to pull free from Violet to save it from falling. A line of drops whipped across Violet's dress. With superb indifference Kitty slipped by and seated herself at the piano.

Violet took a swift step in pursuit.

"Look out!" Sleep called loudly. At least, he tried to lift his voice, but the words sounded dim and far away. Kitty looked up, smiling at Violet, her nimble fingers throwing up a barrage of tumbling melody in the other's face that was like an insult.

Violet stopped, her fingers working. Lane reached out then and caught her arm. She swung about, smiling. Sleep thought she looked as if she was going to kiss him.

He was quite sure he had finished his drink and was surprised to find the glass full to the brim. Palling came in, carrying a slip of paper. Violet seemed to think better of what she was going to do and began to dance, drawing Lane with her. As they passed Palling, he stuck the paper into Lane's breast pocket. Lane danced sullenly, his eyes on Kitty. Suddenly the music slowed to a funeral dirge, impossible as a dance accom-

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paniment. Violet leaned on Lane, looking at Kitty.

"What's the idea, red-head? We can't dance to that."

"Maybe that *is* the idea," Kitty said silkily.

She began to play swing, and in a few bars changed to an old-fashioned waltz and slowed again to the dirge. It amused Sleep to watch the comedy of two women being rude to each other about a man.

He was aware that Palling had taken charge of the wagon. He shoved it forward, separating Violet and Lane. "Drinks," he said, and handed a glass to each. He went on towards the piano with Kitty in mind, but as he passed one end, she slipped around the other.

"You can't expect to monopolize him," she said to Violet. "Anyhow, you've got a man of your own."

The next moment she had Jimmie, and they were slithering across the room, leaving Violet sulking beside the piano. The two of them danced without any music at all, and Lane appeared rather good at it. At least, he threw himself about as if he enjoyed it. Suddenly he was aware of Palling at his elbow with the wagon.

"Here, Joseph, your glass is empty."

"Leave me alone, Palling," he said loudly, but somehow he was holding a full glass to his lips. "There's no kick to this stuff, Palling," he complained. He heard laughter, and a voice said:

"That's what you think."

There was music in the room again. Loud, smashing chords, although there was no one at the piano. Sleep shook his head and stared. The keys were going up and down in runs and chords as if a ghost sat there, depressing them with invisible fingers. Suddenly he began laughing and took a long drink. He had it now, of course. It was a player-piano. Someone had turned on the current and it played itself.

Kitty and Lane were still dancing, and everyone seemed to be singing. Even Breene was singing in a loud, toneless sort of bass. Sleep lifted his voice, but at the first sound there was a dead silence. He thought it was because they all wanted to hear what a wonderful voice he had. Then he realized it was because the piano had reached the end of its roll.

Sleep got to his feet. The room rocked horribly for a moment and then steadied. That's the word, he thought. Steady. He could still carry his liquor.

He tip-toed across the room with elaborate caution, but suddenly found he had bumped into Lane and Kitty. Lane caught his arm and he leaned against him. At least, he thought he was leaning against him, but he must be wrong. It must be the wall, because a man's arm couldn't be hard as that. Kitty put her arms around him and kissed him. "Uncle Joseph's fallen off the wagon," she taunted. She'd never called him Uncle Joseph before. He put his arm around her and tried to pull her closer, but found he had used the hand with the glass and spilled a lot of liquor.

While he was apologizing, Violet came from somewhere and tried to pull Lane

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away from Kitty. "My turn now," she said. They both had an arm, pulling. Sleep saw the buttons on Lane's coat straining as they tugged. He remembered that he wanted to know what was wrong with the shirt underneath. Now was probably the best time to find out. "Excuse me," he said. "Your buttons are in trouble." With a quick gesture, he flipped open the coat.

The two women stopped pulling. Sleep felt a sudden sobriety as if he had come to the surface for a moment. He saw some small holes in the shirt just over the left breast. Surrounding the holes were two red marks, shaped like a woman's lips. The holes looked as if they might have been made by someone biting, and the marks certainly were lipstick. With a sleek smile, Violet drew a finger across her own lips. Then she wrote the letter "V" on Lane's shirt just under the marks. It was the same shade of red. "You know what we do to claim-jumpers out here?" Violet asked. Just before the haze overcame him, Sleep realized Kitty had pulled away and was going towards the door. Lane started after her, but Violet caught his arm. "Let her go," she said loudly.

Lane shoved her aside violently so that she stumbled into Sleep. Then he followed Kitty. Violet wanted to go after him, but Sleep had his arms around her. She tried to tear herself free, but Sleep felt he had something to do, and there was no time to lose. It had to be sooner or later, he knew, and there was a possibility he mightn't feel up to it later.

Holding Violet firmly in his arms so she couldn't get away, he bowed courteously. His poise was a little disturbed by the woman's struggles, but not being a lady she mustn't be allowed to interfere with a gentleman who was doing his duty. One should always say thank you to one's hostess before leaving a party, and Sleep felt the moment was at hand.

"Thank you for a very pleasant time, Violet," he said firmly. "I must go now."

Then he closed his eyes and fell flat on his face. He went a trifle beyond the dictates of true courtesy, perhaps, in dragging his hostess to the floor with him.

9.30 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Lane heard a crash in the drawing-room behind as he ran down the hall, but he was in too much of a hurry to go back. He had eyes only for the slim, ivory figure ahead. He couldn't bear the thought of Kitty thinking he was what Violet had tried to make him. Whatever he was, he wasn't that.

He caught her at the foot of the front steps. She pivoted to face him. Her eyes brought him up short like a vicious upper-cut. She was looking at the marks on his shirt.

"You said you'd never see her again."

"Kitty. I meant it. The hell-cat grabbed me in the dark. If you'll only listen——"

"I'm going home."

"Let me walk with you, please. I *must*."

He fell into step beside the slim ivory figure. The reckless mood was gone from her

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now, and in the dim light, with her face turned slightly away, she made him feel nervous and ashamed. Walking beside her along the shadowy path, he found no words to break the silence. Wrapped in his own brooding thoughts, he found himself coming out unexpectedly into the clearing before the fountain. Kitty stopped with a startled murmur of distaste as she saw the white basin with its pale central shaft in the moonlight. She would have turned back, but Lane's figure blocked the way.

He understood her thought as she glanced over her shoulder at the fountain. For a moment he was at a loss. Then, with a sudden inspiration, he took out his pocket-knife, opened a blade and drove it through the linen of his shirt. Four swift slashes and he had cut out the lipstick markings. He twisted the linen into a ball and threw it into the bushes. "That's the end of Violet," he said.

He thrilled to the quick smile with which she rewarded the act. Kitty drew him forward into the moonlight.

"Let's see," she said, studying the ragged hole he had cut in the fabric. Then she looked up so that the moonlight flashed momentarily in her eyes. "If she ever touches you again, Jimmie ——" she whispered, and stopped.

"What, Kitty?" He waited eagerly, hopeful the girl was going to say something which would justify the joy running through him. Maybe she was going to forget the whole rotten affair of the garden. Standing there, just looking at her, filled him with a fierce kind of ecstasy.

Kitty turned and walked towards the fountain. He breathed deeply several times, watching her go. He mustn't let himself get those crazy impulses about her. It would spoil everything if he made a mistake now. Slowly he followed her.

"Kitty ——" he said, and stopped, just as she had done.

She turned suddenly, looking at him. "Tell me, Jimmie, can you really fight?"

"Sure I can. They call me the side-winder. That's because I circle left and wind-up as I go. Anyone who gets caught in the wind-up goes down."

"If you're really good, Jimmie, you'll go places. Who's your manager?"

"Oh, I guess I just manage myself."

She sat up straight. "Do you really mean you haven't got a manager? But I thought all fighters had one."

"I haven't — yet. Say ——" He paused, staring at her. "How'd *you* like to manage me?"

"Jimmie Lane, are you proposing to me?"

"Proposing!" He stared at her blankly. Then something exploded in his brain as if he had been rocked by a fighter's glove coming from nowhere.

"*Yes*," he shouted. "*Yes, I am.*"

10 p.m. to 10.30 p.m.

Between them, Palling and Breene had carried Joseph Sleep into the consultation-room and laid him out on a couch. Palling was very well satisfied with the way things

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were going, but he could see Breene was getting scared again. As he bent over the unconscious form of Joseph Sleep, he was aware of Breene's breath on his cheek. "What's the matter with him. He isn't going to ——"

"He'll be all right." Palling's hands were busy with Sleep's collar and shirt. "I put a little something extra into his glass. Just so he'd be a bit vague about an hour or two of tonight's festivities. We're going to have our hands full any minute now."

"Won't he be *suspicious*?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Breene, quit croaking. Everything's going along the way I want it. Prop his head up and fetch me that rug off the chair. We'll leave him here."

He stared at Breene as he crossed for the rug. He was going to need him, of course, but when he'd done his part and the need for his services was past, it was going to be very unpleasant having to give him all that money. After all, he was getting the girl, and that should be enough for him. He began to think it too bad he had been so generous and promised to go fifty-fifty. He might have got him to come in with a less amount. He remembered happily he hadn't told him the exact sum Sleep had so he might be able to scale it down considerably.

Breene came back with the rug. Palling took it from him and spread it over the unconscious Sleep. He saw Breene glance at his watch.

"They've been out there over half an hour," he said anxiously.

Palling nodded. "We'll be hearing from them soon, I fancy."

"But, damn it, man, suppose they went off in Lane's car? Suppose it happens a long way off and he calls in another doctor?"

Palling was startled for a moment. It would be awkward if the young fool did that. He suddenly relaxed and smiled. "I think you'll find they stayed right here in one of the gardens. They were in too much of a hurry to go far."

"Hurry? Hurry for what?"

"Well, what do *you* think?"

There was a curious look in Breene's eyes. "You don't think Lane's in love with her, do you?"

"You can call it that."

"I won't have it, Palling. I'm going after them. I won't have him pawing her."

"Let them have their fun. I promise you it's only for a few minutes."

"But if he's in love with her, won't he start asking questions — afterwards?"

"He can't prove anything, I tell you. It's Kitty we've got to think about now. Let's go see what Violet's doing. She's confoundedly quiet in there."

At the drawing-room door he stopped abruptly and Breene bumped into him from behind. Cora lay sprawled on a couch, unbelievably huge. Beside her on the couch was a whisky bottle from which drops continued to trickle into a puddle staining the rug below. She snored rather awesomely.

Breene looked around. "Where's Violet?" he asked blankly.

Palling supposed she might have gone to her room. He opened his lips to suggest it.

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At that moment, somewhere in the garden, they heard a shot. Then they heard a man's voice shouting. Palling turned and ran along the hall, followed by Breene. They heard the gun again, twice. On the veranda, Palling stumbled over a leather holster. They ran down the path, hearing Lane's voice somewhere to the left. "The fountain," Palling snapped, and plunged through the shrubbery.

Almost together, they broke through to the clearing. Lane was on his knees beside a figure in ivory. Violet was lying on the ground a dozen feet beyond.

"Who fired those shots?" Palling demanded. Lane looked up and pointed towards Violet. "She did, damn her."

Palling's heart went down. He remembered her infernal skill. Behind him he heard Breene babbling. "Now what do we do? For God's sake, now what do we do?"

Palling knelt beside Kitty. He noticed her dress was stained with water, but there were no signs of blood. She lay on her back, her face white in the moonlight. Swiftly, he turned her over. Nothing. He could feel the movement under his hands as she breathed easily. He leaped to his feet and ran to Violet. Lane called after him. "Don't worry about her. I knocked her out." He kicked something in the gravel, and a gun slithered to Palling's feet. "I had to do it to make her stop shooting. She was too drunk to take aim."

Palling picked up the weapon. Heavier than the one he had found in her room. He shivered a little, wondering how many of these playthings she had. As he slipped the gun into his pocket and went back to Kitty, she was still unconscious.

"She isn't shot, Lane. What happened?"

He took hold of the girl's wrist, counting the pulse. Maybe it was the drug, after all. Just as he planned. Lane gestured hopelessly.

"We were sitting here on the edge of the fountain. She — she got a little excited, and then ——"

"You were making love to her, I suppose?"

"Well, what if I was? She fainted."

Palling nodded. Of course the girl fainted. The stuff in her glass would work all the quicker under the stimulus of excitement. "Go on," he snapped.

"I tried to bring her round by bathing her forehead with water from the fountain. Then I heard someone coming. I called for help, and Mrs. Palling came. She had a gun and told me to get away from Kitty before she shot the both of us. I told her to stop being a fool, and she fired. The bullet went into the fountain and splashed water all over Kitty and me. I dropped Kitty and made a grab for her. She fired again twice before I clipped her. I had to do it."

Palling nodded. He could scarcely keep from shouting with joy. "You'd better carry her into my house," he said. "Breene'll help me with Violet."

He watched Lane go down the path with the girl. Then he grinned at Breene. The undertaker leaned closer. "Is it all right?" he whispered anxiously.

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"Couldn't be better," Palling answered. "Take Violet's feet."

Palling felt a great sense of relief. Fate, he felt, had played into his hands. The girl had fainted under the stress of Lane's attentions. How very convenient. He knew now the exact diagnosis which would explain Kitty's untimely death.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE MORNING of Sarah Reckon's funeral dawned drearily. Long before daybreak, Highway wakened in his little room on the ground floor and heard the water pouring from the roof and rattling like small shot against the palm fronds. For a long time he stroked his beard, trying to make a pattern of the things which had happened during the brief time he had been in Poldrate Street.

When the three shots cracked through the trees, he had been seated in the Reckon garden, smoking his pipe and petting the complacent Squire. Knocking out the hot ashes from his pipe against the thick sole of his brogue, he hurried into Poldrate Street. The dog trotted beside him almost to the Palling gate, and then stopped. Highway called to him, snapping his fingers, but the dog refused to go farther.

Passing the Palling gate, he heard excited voices and went in. When Lane passed, carrying the unconscious Kitty, Highway could have reached out and touched him. Concealed by the broad leaves of a banana plant, he watched Palling and Breene pick up Violet. He wondered what Breene meant by asking, "Is it all right?" He was even more puzzled by Palling's reply, "Couldn't be better." To Highway it seemed a doubtful comment upon the extraordinary condition of two feminine members of the party.

He was waiting on the little front porch of the Reckon house when Lane returned half an hour later. From him he learned that Kitty, without a mark on her body, had been put to bed in the Palling house. From the moment she fainted in Lane's arms, she had shown no sign of recovering consciousness. Highway questioned him repeatedly, but he had been positive on one point. Kitty fainted *before* a shot was fired and *before* she even suspected the presence of Mrs. Palling and the gun. He admitted he had been kissing her at the time. Under pointed inquiry, he supposed he was being a bit rough about it. But he insisted with rather a shamefaced grin that Kitty was being a bit rough herself. In fact, Highway gained the impression from his description that it had been pretty much of a catch-as-catch-can affair in which she had more than held her own. Without warning, she had suddenly gone limp in his arms, her hands pawing feebly at his face. He said she tried to say something about her head feeling funny. It scared him, Lane said, having a woman turn from something pretty lively into a corpse, as it were, in such a short time.

He was bathing her forehead when he heard Violet coming. The woman burst into

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the clearing waving a gun, and ordered him away from Kitty before she killed the both of them. She was insanely drunk, Lane said. The first shot hit the water. Kitty was lying in his arms, her eyes closed; yet Palling insisted it was the shock of Violet's attack which caused her to faint. Very odd, Highway thought.

Kitty was still in a coma when they went to bed, although that was long after two o'clock. Lane had stolen into the Palling garden and met Breene coming away. The undertaker had been rather surprised, Lane thought, at the sight of him. But he talked readily enough. Kitty was in bed, in no pain apparently, but showing no signs of recovering. Violet had gone to bed drunk and quarrelsome. Cora, with the aid of several quarts of black coffee, had been scalded into semi-sobriety and impressed into acting nurse for Kitty. Joseph Sleep, more than a little drunk and abusive, had been taken home and put to bed. Highway was puzzled about Sleep. He hadn't appeared the kind of man who got drunk. A little wine now and then, perhaps.

He continued to ponder Sleep's drunkenness as he took his accustomed cold tub.

While he towelled himself he heard Lane preparing breakfast in the kitchen. The odors of bacon and coffee spurred his movements. The meal they shared was mainly silent. Lane had already asked about Kitty and been told there was no change. Palling had asked, as a matter of neighbourly consideration, that nothing be said about the affair last night. Violet was sober this morning and felt very badly about her conduct, he said. Apparently the shots had attracted no attention. Palling appeared worried about Kitty's condition.

"He blamed it on a gland," Lane said, looking puzzled. "Thymus was what he called it. He said it was too big."

Highway nodded. "That's possible," he said. "The thymus is supposed to retract as people grow up. If it doesn't, it's likely to cause trouble."

It might explain the girl going into a faint before she heard the shots. Shock was bad for an enlarged thymus. Perhaps the young man's method of making love was shocking, although from what he said the lassie wasn't the kind to be upset by anything but the lack of it.

The funeral was set for half past ten. At a quarter after, they went down the path together. The rain had stopped, reluctantly it seemed.

Highway felt his heart sink as he sat down in Mafia Breene's funeral establishment. It was not that death was unfamiliar. But the calculated solemnity of a civilized burial always depressed him.

There were few mourners in the plain wooden benches. In the front row Highway saw four strangers, apparently pressed into service as pall-bearers. Behind them, each in a bench alone as if seeking solitude in the house of death, people sat with bowed heads. Sleep was there and Dr. Palling. There was no sign of his wife. "Face" Gordon sat farther back with a woman Highway supposed to be his mother. There were half a dozen middle-aged women, sad-looking souls with grey hair and cheap hats set stiffly on their heads. There was a hushed, unhappy look about their faces as they waited.

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Then a thin, sing-song voice began tossing words into the silence. There was a man standing beside the coffin with a book in his hands, a man with stooping shoulders and glasses set crookedly on his nose. He informed the unhappy group frozen in the pews that their dear sister, Sarah Reckon, was not dead. They must not think of her as anything but happy upon a sunlit shore where they, in turn, would one day go. Highway sank back in his hard chair, dulling his ears to the minister's pitiful attempt to soothe whatever grief lay in his hearer's hearts.

It was a short distance from the chapel to the grave in the adjoining cemetery. Highway walked with Lane between the head-stones until they reached the pile of new-turned earth. Standing under an umbrella held by Breene, the minister hastened his last words. With the first rumble of dirt upon the boards below, the little group began to drift away. Highway and Lane lingered until the grave was partly filled, and then followed. Tramping along Washington Street, Highway lit his pipe. The smell of tobacco seemed to help them both. He sensed the younger man's eyes on him and felt he wanted to say something.

"What is it, Jimmie?"

"I was a fool last night, Highway," he said. "I *love* that girl, damn it. Not just — well, you know."

"That's good."

"I can't understand this gland business. She's not soft. She's in just as good condition as I am. She shouldn't stay out for hours like this."

They turned into Poldrate Street and found "Face" Gordon with his dog. Highway stopped. "How's Squire?"

"Face" kicked the sidewalk gloomily. "He isn't my dog any more, I guess. He ain't the same since he came back."

Highway bent to examine the dog. His eyes were clear, the nose black and moist. "What's wrong, 'Face'?"

"Well, I wanted him to go up the street with me. He comes to Palling's gate and then quits."

Highway remembered the dog's curious refusal to follow him last night. "Let's try him again. Come along, Squire."

The dog trotted willingly enough beside the little group. Lane, after a glance through the gate at his own cheerless premises, followed. At the Palling gate both Lane and the dog stopped. "I'm going to ask again," the fighter said, and went inside.

Highway was watching the dog, who was staring ahead, his nostrils working. He growled faintly. "Come along, Squire." Confidently Highway stepped out. The dog took a few steps and stopped again. Despite Highway's coaxing, he remained where he was, his head drooping and tail between his legs.

Highway stooped and patted the dog, who responded happily, sensing that he was not in disgrace for his refusal to obey. Using his handkerchief as a leader through his collar, Highway walked along the street. Thus led, Squire went forward without re-

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sistance, but there was no eagerness in his bearing. They went by the Sleep gateway and came to the entrance opening into the shadowed premises of Mafia Breene.

There, Squire braced his four feet and hung back. A faint whine came from his throat and his eyes were filled with tortured appeal. Highway slipped the leash. The animal turned and retreated a hundred feet before he stopped, looking back. There was shame in his manner. "Face" sniffed. "He's sure scared of something."

Highway nodded thoughtfully and stared into the Breene garden. There was no doubt the animal had experienced something very unpleasant inside those gates, something which had happened during the days of his mysterious disappearance.

"He'll get over it, 'Face'. Better take him home and make a fuss over him. Don't punish the dog. You'll only frighten him."

He watched the boy as he walked to his dog. Boy and dog went on, disappearing together through the Gordon gates. Highway strolled into the Breene premises. The undertaker, he hoped, would be detained long enough for him to make a brief inspection of his flowers. His search was shorter than he hoped. Among the sodden blooms along the main path he found what he was seeking, a little clump of a particularly dark-flowered geranium. There had been some like it in Sarah Reckon's basket, and nowhere else in the Poldrate Street gardens had he found a single bloom. He knew now beyond a doubt the woman had entered Mafia Breene's grounds the night before she died.

He helped himself to a few of the flowers and left the garden. He wanted time to put all the odds and ends in his mind together into some kind of a picture.

Young Gordon had been more than a little helpful, he thought, as he tamped hot ashes in his pipe. The lad had a quick eye.

He had learned from "Face" that Sarah Reckon's garden was the only one watered the night before she died. The boy attached no importance to that, but Highway did. He learned of Joseph Sleep's annoyance because his grounds had been neglected by the elder Gordon. Why had Sleep thought so? Undoubtedly because he was convinced the gardener had watered the Palling and Breene gardens. What had given him that idea?

Suddenly Highway paused, pipe half-way to his bearded lips. Joseph Sleep was giving a party on that particular night. Suppose during the evening one or more of his guests had left his house, returning later? Palling and Breene, for instance. When they came in there were marks of water on their shoes, marks which Sleep had noticed. What more natural than that he should suppose they had walked through a freshly watered garden? Since he knew his own had not been touched, he would be convinced the gardener had given them service and not himself. When the elder Gordon denied watering either garden, he would be left wondering where his guests got wet feet. Highway knew. The flowers in his pocket told him Sarah Reckon had been in Mafia Breene's garden, and Joseph Sleep's questions convinced him either Breene or Palling or both had been in the Reckon place.

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Jimmie Lane came out of the Palling gate. There was no need to ask a question. His gloomy face told Highway what he wanted to know. Kitty McKay was still unconscious. He wondered if she would ever waken. He was beginning to wonder if someone intended that she never should.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MONK WAS CLEANING the preparation-room when Mafia Breene came back from the funeral. He turned off some of the lights the fellow was burning, disregarding his disgusted grunt.

He stood watching Monk as the latter gathered up the shabby heap of clothing which had belonged to Sarah Reckon. Monk went out, carrying the garments. Slowly Breene crossed to the preparation-table, his eyes vacant. With the palm of his hand he stroked the marble, trying to visualize the slender body of Kitty lying there.

It was going to be a pretty tricky business pretending the girl was dead and going through all the movements. He hoped nothing would go wrong. They were lucky to have got her into Palling's house. Very few people would see her. Once Palling thought it was safe to announce her death, he could go right in and get her. From the moment she came down here into the preparation-room, they were out of danger. After that it would be simple routine up to the moment when she went on view in her casket. They'd have to let people see her, of course, but that's what all the experiments with the dog had been for. She would go into her casket and people would look at her and there she'd be lying dead. Lane would see her and the minister and maybe that bearded tramp. It would be like him to come spying around. Sleep, too; but under the circumstances he didn't think the old man would be hard to convince.

But was it? He began to worry about the thing. Suppose Palling's experiments with the dog didn't work out with a human being? The animal certainly looked dead, and there had been no respiratory movement. But could they do the same thing with a girl and get away with it? Things had gone too far, of course, to stop. They'd have to go through with it and take a chance. Breene tried to fix his thoughts on Kitty and forget the other things.

He couldn't separate them. He was worried about the operation Palling would have to perform. First he would inject the sodium luminal to the point of anesthesia. After that he would fix a tube in the trachea, just as he had in the dog. That was the part which worried Breene. Palling's knives were going to mar Kitty's lovely body. He had to do that, of course, because through that tube the oxygen would find its way into her lungs from the small tank hidden at her feet in the casket. Just enough oxygen to keep her alive without respiratory movement while people looked at her after the service. He was going to make up the face himself, of course, and arrange the lights so

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it would be in shadow. He mustn't forget the canister of soda lime inside the coffin to absorb the carbon dioxide after the lid was sealed. It would be horrible if it were overlooked and she died of suffocation.

There were two caskets. He must take another look to make sure they were identical, although people wouldn't be likely to notice a small difference. When the one with Kitty was wheeled from the chapel, it would be switched and the other carried into the cemetery with its load of bricks. Then he and Palling would have to do some grave-robbing at night with all the chances of discovery.

He wondered how much of an incision Palling would make for the tube. It was a pity, he thought, to mar that beautiful body, but there was no alternative. It was that or kill the girl outright as Palling proposed to do in the first place. He'd talked him out of that because he wanted her for himself. It had seemed a little thing then, a scar; but now he thought of it at close range, as it were, he didn't like it. And there'd be a wound requiring care and constant dressing afterwards. Palling would have to do that, of course, so he couldn't take the girl away until it was healed. That would mean locking the little room again where they'd kept the dog. He wondered how he was going to keep Cora from finding out what was hidden there. He wished there was some way of sending her off on a trip, but he knew she wouldn't go without Him. He wondered how much money she had in that package under His bed. He'd always intended to have a try at counting it, but was never able to co-ordinate opportunity and courage. Cora wouldn't be a pleasant person to annoy. People were never pleasant when anyone interfered with their money.

For that matter, Old Man Sleep mightn't be exactly genial either. Palling seemed very confident he could be induced to give up without much trouble, but Breene wasn't sure. Palling had promised him the girl and half of what he got. He didn't know the amount, but from one or two hints Palling had given, he supposed the total was somewhere around twenty-five thousand. Very generous of Palling to give him half and the girl too. He could live a long time in that cabin high up in the Sierras on twelve thousand. It was a perfect spot for such a hideout, three miles up a grown-over mountain-trail where no one ever came. He could keep Kitty there with no one the wiser. If he ever got tired of her, which didn't seem possible the way he felt now, there would be an easy way out. He didn't think he would hesitate if it was a case of choosing between her safety and his. But that was something in the future. Just now he felt he must find out what was going on in the Palling house.

He went through the underground passage. Outside His door he stopped, listening. There was no sound inside. Cautiously he opened the door and went in. The room was in semi-shadow, but he could see the wasted form under the covers. The eyes were closed. Swiftly he tip-toed across the room. Without hesitation he reached stealthy hands under the mattress. He had just touched the package when a sobbing cry startled him. Frantic eyes stared at him from under the pillow. The cover on the bed writhed as the thin form underneath threshed wildly. Breene turned and fled,

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the spectacle of frothing fear printed on his mind. He heard the door bang thunderously behind as he went down the hall. Not until he reached his own front gate did he stop to mop his face with shaking hands.

What a fool he had been to disturb that frantic creature. Fortunately, Cora didn't seem to be around the house. Marketing, probably. If she didn't return until He quieted down, she wouldn't be any wiser. He peered along Poldrate Street. It wouldn't do for her to see him leaving the house. She would connect the creature's agony with him and suspect the truth. The street was clear. Feeling relieved, he walked towards Palling's. It was a silly thing to have done, but he knew now exactly where the package was.

He was surprised to see the hands of his watch pointing to the noon hour. Kitty had been in Palling's care for twelve hours. It would happen now, he thought, very soon. He knew it was against the law for a physician to issue a certificate as to the cause of death unless there had been medical attention for more than twenty-four hours. If they stayed within the law, it would be the undertaker's duty to notify the coroner and have a medical examination. They didn't dare do that, of course, and he hoped no one would notice and check them up on it.

He hoped no one saw him enter the Palling garden. It might seem odd and people would remember afterwards they had seen him going in *before* the event. He had an excuse, of course. He could say he simply wanted to know how the girl was getting on. And he did. By God, he did!

Lane came around the corner of the house and almost bumped into him. "Hello," he said. "What do you . . ." He hesitated. Going to ask me what I wanted, Breene thought. Damned impudence.

"You were going to ask me something?"

Lane shifted his feet and spoke in a low voice, glancing uneasily at the Palling windows. "Say, Breene, do you know what *status lymphaticus* is?"

Breene stared at him in amazement. And then suddenly he understood. Palling had been laying the ground-work. He was going to say the girl died of an irregularity of the thymus gland. Better be careful. Let Palling do the talking. He shook his head. "No," he said. "Is it a flower?"

Lane shrugged impatiently. "Flower nothing," he growled. "Palling says that's what's wrong with Kitty. She just lies there as if she was dead."

Breene nodded. "I see. A coma. Well, probably she'll come out of it."

"You think so?" Lane's face showed eagerness.

"I'm sure I can't say, Lane. Not being a medical man, I wouldn't know. I usually come along after the medicos have given up." He was pleased to see the look of anxiety follow hope in Lane's eyes.

He entered the Palling door without ringing. Violet was coming down the stairway. He looked at her curiously. He could tell by the lithe gliding movement and the slight swaying of the hips, she was on the make again. That meant Palling was

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engaged for the time being and not likely to interfere. A month ago he would have welcomed the prospect of having that dark devil in his arms, but now he cursed the ill luck which had brought them together. He allowed her to sweep him into an embrace and hoped he did it convincingly.

Presently he checked her with a faint withdrawal. She looked at him inquiringly. "Where's Ivar?"

"With Kitty. He's sent for a nurse."

What was Palling thinking of, bringing in a total stranger? How could they expect to get away with what they planned when they had an outsider watching every move? A trained nurse, too. Why, the woman would have to be the worst ignoramus not to realize they were doing something off colour. Could it be that fool Palling was so cocksure of himself he wanted an outside witness just to make things appear on the up and up?

Breene's nervousness became acute. He felt a positive nausea at the close contact of the woman in his arms and shoved her aside. The resentment in her eyes made him worse. "I'm sorry, Violet. I — I was thinking about that girl. She must be very ill."

"Well, what if she is? She's nothing to you. Or *is* she?"

He tried to banish her suspicion by taking her in his arms again, but she no longer yielded with abandon. He felt like choking her, but instead he tried to make her yield. Damn Palling! What was he thinking about, anyway?

Footsteps above made them draw apart. Instinctively he began scrubbing his lips. Violet shook her head. "There's no lipstick," she said.

He saw her eyes shining with excitement. Almost caught in his arms, and she loved it, gloried in the dangerous game right under Palling's eyes. It never seemed to occur to her she might get someone else into trouble.

Palling came down in a stumbling run, calling Violet's name. The urgency in his tones startled even Breene. He stopped at the foot of the steps, balancing against the newel post. "She's gone," he said. His voice was little more than a whisper, but it carried. Breene felt himself believing it, and checked himself suddenly. Of course. It was just as they arranged. But Palling was a damned good actor.

He could feel the searing curiosity in Violet. "What happened to her?"

Palling mopped his forehead. "*Status lymphaticus.* Enlargement of the thymus gland. Sudden shock brought on the coma. She got away from me without coming around."

He glanced thoughtfully at Violet. The woman drew back on the defensive. "What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"We'd better keep that part to ourselves," Palling said in a low voice. "Nobody heard the shots, so we won't have to explain them. Just say she succumbed to shock from Lane's love-making. It won't be hard to make him take the blame for that."

"What about the nurse?" Breene asked.

Palling looked at him, and only because he knew the man so well was he able to

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detect the faint smile hidden under his beard. "She's coming up the garden path," he said. Breene had a sudden conviction Palling had seen her from an upstairs window, and timed his announcement of Kitty's death accordingly. At that moment they heard the rusty scraping of the door-pull and the bell jangled in the kitchen.

"There she is now," Palling said quietly. As he went towards the door, he glanced at Breene.

"You'll take charge, of course, Mafia."

Breene realized he'd have to do it all himself. Never do to let Monk get anywhere near the girl. He'd know at once she wasn't dead, only in some kind of a drugged sleep. That must have been powerful stuff Palling put in her drink last night. He'd have to get along and bring the service-wagon himself. Send Monk on a message somewhere. Then Palling could help him carry the girl out.

Palling stopped half-way to the door and looked at Violet. "Would you mind going over to Sleep's house and telling him, Violet?"

Violet looked at him angrily and then shrugged. "I'll have to dress first."

"Thanks," Palling said, and opened the door.

He seemed a little taken aback at the sight of Lane. Beside him stood a woman in the neat costume of the professional nurse. Behind them, half-way up the steps, stood the bearded tramp, smoking. Palling bowed to the woman.

"I'm afraid you've had a useless trip, Nurse. Your patient has just gone."

Lane gasped at that, and seized Palling's arm. "Do you mean she's — she's . . ."

Palling nodded gravely. Breene was conscious of the tramp removing his pipe from between his lips. He was staring intently at Palling. Lane was babbling incoherent questions, but stopped at the doctor's lifted hand.

"Please, Lane. I'll explain presently. You too, Nurse. Mafia, I think you'd better get along with your work."

Breene went down the steps. He had to pass within a few inches of the tramp who made no effort to give him room. He was conscious of the fellow's steady stare as he went by. Almost insolent, he thought resentfully. At any other time he would have asked the fellow what he meant, but just now there was too much on his mind. He had to get Kitty out of there and down to the preparation-room before anyone had a chance to see her. He could trust Palling to have them all out of the way when he got back. In another twenty minutes he'd have Kitty in the preparation-room, alone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KITTY WAS BACK in the sycamore tree again, watching Jimmie Lane and Violet Palling. Then, by a dizzy flight, she found herself down on the edge of the fountain with Jimmie's arms around her and his voice crying, "Yes — yes," in her ears.

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The rough cradling of his great arms gave her exquisite happiness. She felt again the sudden rush of dizziness as if she were going to faint. Violet's voice mingled confusingly with the sound of a shot. She stirred and moaned slightly. The hands which had gripped her shoulders loosened, and when she moved again they were lifted.

She thought she heard steps and the vague sound of a door opening and closing, but when she opened her eyes she could see nothing but a bright, hard light directly overhead. The glare hurt, so she shut them again and turned her head a little sideways. The movement made her conscious of the hard surface on which she lay. She turned her head still farther, feeling a cold smoothness under her ear. When she opened her eyes again, she saw a white marble slab which extended a foot or so. Beyond that were white walls and a floor covered with rubber matting. There was a curious, powerful odour which made her think of lime and disinfectant. The dizziness which accompanied her flight from the tree to the fountain came over her again. She closed her eyes and lay still.

She began to wonder why she was lying on this smooth marble slab under such a powerful light. She opened her eyes, staring about in bewilderment. On all four sides she saw the flat white walls, broken only by glassed cases holding curious instruments. There was a tiled sink against one wall with gleaming faucets. She rolled her eyes upward, looking beyond, and saw a solitary door, white like the walls. It suggested strength and solidity by the way it fitted into its frame.

She tried to sit upright. Sudden dizziness made her reel sideways. Only the cat-like reflexes of her young limbs saved her from going over the edge. She swung her feet around and slithered to the floor, balancing against the marble.

She braced her trembling legs with an effort. She lifted a hand to shove back a strand of hair which had fallen across her eyes. The movement made her aware of a peculiar looseness in her nether garments. She glanced down, at the same time extending a foot. Her silk stocking hung loosely, the wrinkles showing above the slipper. Instinctively she stooped, hauling up her dress. The garters on the right side hung adrift and the stocking, unsupported, had slipped almost to her knee.

The familiar movement of drawing the stocking taut over her shapely leg and snapping the fasteners into place did much to rationalize her thoughts. But when she let her dress fall and straightened, she still felt a little dizzy.

It occurred to her that she had fainted and been carried into this curious room to recover. A strange place for them to go out and leave her.

Why had she fainted, anyhow? Was she of such pitiful virgin stuff that a man's love-making made her keel over like a Victorian schoolgirl? What must Jimmie think of her? He'd be going back to Violet.

"Darn it!" she said aloud, and was startled by the mumbling way the words came back at her from the walls. She glanced around, and for the first time noticed a second door, closely fitted in its white frame like the first.

The place had an unpleasant, shut-in atmosphere which made her feel uncomfort-

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able. She made an effort to throw off the dizziness, walking towards one of the doors. She felt a drink of some kind would banish it entirely. After that, if she hadn't muffed things completely, there was some unfinished business with Jimmie Lane. Thinking of him, she felt better and turned the door handle.

The door was locked. She twisted the handle several times before conviction stopped her. Then she crossed to the second door. Even before she tried it, she knew it too was locked. Impatiently she tried to shake it, but it fitted too closely, there was no play. In a fit of anger she beat upon the smooth surface. It was like rock. "Hello," she called. "Let me out!" The words came back at her from the walls.

She stepped away, staring at the impassive barrier. She remembered now the vague impression she had heard steps retreating and that the door, one of them, opened and closed. Someone had been with her just at the moment she was recovering consciousness. Someone — not Jimmie Lane — had been fumbling with the front of her dress. And the garter! It had not come adrift by accident. Someone had dared to loosen it while she lay defenceless on the marble slab.

Kitty was feeling stronger now and beginning to get angry. She walked quickly about the room, examining its details. In less than half a minute she knew something of her situation. She was not only locked in, but her prison was practically a sound-proof chamber.

The feeling of anger was gone, leaving something akin to fear in its place. Why was she locked in this strange place? Where was Jimmie? It was odd, she thought, that he had let them do this to her. Perhaps it was some kind of a joke.

The door gave no sound opening. It was a little current of air on her cheek which made her turn just in time to see Mafia Breene closing it. She noticed he was not wearing the clothes he had on when he arrived at the party. It struck her as odd he should have taken time to change them. While she stared at him, angrily waiting for a word of explanation, he turned his back and did something with the door handle. It occurred to her he was locking it by some secret device.

"What are you doing?" she demanded sharply. "Why am I here?"

Breene turned slowly and came towards her. She saw his eyes move slowly from her face to her breasts and down over the lower part of her body. He was breathing rather noisily through his nostrils and she saw his tongue moisten dry lips. When he spoke, it was in a husky whisper, as if his voice was not quite under control.

"How are you feeling, my dear?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she was not his dear. A sense of caution warned her not to be too sharp until she learned why she was confined in this room.

"I'm all right," she said. "Let's get out of here. The air is foul."

She started towards the door, but he laid a hand on her arm.

"I'm afraid we can't do that, Kitty my dear."

She stared at him. "What do you mean, can't? I don't like it. I'm going."

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She shook off his detaining arm, and crossed to the door by which he had entered. As she expected, it was locked. She turned. "Open this door."

Breene shook his head and remained silent, staring at her. Kitty felt furious anger struggling with the weakness in her knees. She was aware of being very hungry in spite of the dizziness which returned at intervals. She wondered how she could be so hungry unless she had been unconscious a long time, longer than she knew. She had a momentary feeling of panic when she felt on the verge of fainting again. It was the realization that if she did she would be alone and defenceless with Breene which saved her. By a tremendous effort she kept her temper under control.

"I don't know why you're behaving like this, but perhaps you'll explain. Why have you locked that door?"

He was going over her again with those bright, greedy glances. It made her mind sick, just as her body was. She could have strangled Breene for daring to look at her in that fashion. "Did you hear what I asked you?"

Breene nodded. "Yes, I heard. But I'm sorry I can't let you go, my dear. Perhaps you'll let me explain ——"

"That's what I'm asking you to do."

He bowed. "Well, you see, you fainted ——"

Kitty lost control. "I know that, you fool. Are you going to open the door?"

A vicious look came into his face. He shook his head. "No, I'm not going to open it. And you'd better stop calling me names. It won't do you any good."

For a moment she stared at him as if unable to credit her ears. The man must be insane. "Jimmie Lane'll kill you for this," she said. A look of hatred passed over his features. Jimmie's name has the power to sting him, she thought. "Open the door at once and perhaps I'll agree to say nothing to him about you."

Breene's lips scarcely moved. The voice, when it came in a thin whisper, hardly reached her at all. "You won't say anything to anybody," he said. "You're dead." In the utter silence he leaned a little closer and whispered again, "*I'm going to bury you.*"

Kitty made no effort to speak this time. It was clear to her now, quite clear. She was locked in the room with a madman. There could be no other explanation for the man's behavior. He was going to attack her. And then suddenly she remembered what he had said about being dead and his intention to bury her. He was going to kill her — afterwards. The realization crashed into her brain with sudden panic. Before she knew it, she was screaming. The sound rattled back deafeningly from the walls.

Breene came towards her, holding out his hands. "For God's sake don't do that. It's no use, anyway, because you can't be heard. These walls are sound-proof."

"Let me out of here."

"I can't, I tell you. If you'll only let me explain why you're here. It was all planned — from the day we knew you were coming. Palling wanted to ——"

"Palling? Is he in this?"

Breene nodded. "I'll tell you all about it if you'll listen. You can't do us any harm

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because you're never going to be able to tell anyone. That's what I meant when I said you're dead. You may as well get used to the idea because it'll make things easier for you. You're never going to see anyone again. Nobody but Palling and me. And not very much of him. Only me." He smirked at her.

Kitty felt the door, cold and unyielding, behind her shoulder blades. She used it for leverage. The blow caught Breene unawares as her hard little fist smashed against his cheek. He went over backwards and his head bumped the rubber matting with a thud.

Breene sat up, patting at his cut cheek with a handkerchief. His eyes flickered. "You'll be sorry for that," he said evenly. Rolling away from her, he got to his feet and went on as if nothing had happened. "Palling drugged you last night at the party. Everybody thinks you're dead."

"Dead! But — *why*?"

"He's going to blackmail Sleep. Frighten him into paying," he explained carefully. "If he refuses, then Palling will threaten to tell the coroner he isn't satisfied with the cause of your death and hint Sleep poisoned you. You see, Sleep's the only one who would profit by your death. He gets all your money."

He must have seen by the expression in her eyes she did not understand.

"I forgot, you don't know anything about the money, do you?"

"No."

"It's yours," he said. "Your grandmother left you quite a lot. Sleep is only the trustee. He wasn't to tell you anything about it until you got married so you'd be safe from fortune-hunters. But if you die before you get married, Sleep gets it all. So you see he'd be suspected if you were poisoned. That's why the scheme is so good. Sleep'll pay up rather than take any chances. He'll pay up with *your* money."

Kitty looked at him with incredulity. You mean you're planning to — to ——"

Breene shook his head. "Nothing's going to happen to you, Kitty. It must sound pretty cockeyed but it's going to work out. We'll scare the daylights out of Sleep and he'll pay. Palling will tell him if he doesn't and there's an autopsy on you, they'll find poison for sure. The police will never suspect us because why would *we* poison you? We stand to gain nothing. Sleep does. That's why he'll be frightened."

She was hammering at the door again and screaming when he dragged her off. She felt his hot hands across her mouth and they were worse than her fear, so she stopped.

"Listen," he said, "you've nothing to be scared about. We're going through with a phoney funeral, and after that you're going away with *me*."

Kitty felt the dizziness would get the best of her. The man was insane and what he said didn't make sense. He saw the thought in her eyes and shook his head.

"The scheme's fool-proof, Kitty. Palling said you were dead. He's signed the death-certificate. I brought you down here myself. This is my undertaking place, in case you don't know. Palling's coming down here to help prepare you for the funeral."

Kitty buried her eyes in her hands to shut out the sight of him. Then when she felt his arms around her she shook him off.

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"It's a phoney funeral," he explained hastily. "Palling's found a way to make you look dead so we can put you in a casket and let people look at you. The only reason you're not dead is because I'm crazy about you."

She lashed out at his face again, but he stepped aside. "You wouldn't dare kill me, you horrible animal."

Breene grinned wearily. "This is a place where we handle bodies all the time. They don't mean much. Palling would kill you in a jiffy if he thought you'd made trouble. That's what happened to Sarah Reckon, you know. Palling jabbed a needle into her because she spied on us. We couldn't let her go blabbing what she'd seen."

It must be all some frightful nightmare, she told herself. Presently she would waken. "What are you going to do?" she whispered.

"Take it easy," he said. "Palling has a little operation to perform on you first. You'll just go to sleep in a perfectly natural way. Then we'll put you in the coffin. I'll attend to that part myself." He leered at her. "Day after tomorrow, we'll have the usual service. People will take a look and go away. That'll be the last of Kitty McKay so far as they're concerned. I switch caskets and bury the empty one. When you wake up, it'll be all over. Then you and me'll go away together."

Curious, Kitty thought, how long a nightmare can continue and how real everything seemed, if there could be anything real about such a frightful thing. "Where are you taking me?" she asked dully.

Breene smiled. "I've got a cabin in the Sierras. You'll like it."

Once again Kitty felt the little current of air disturb the hair on the back of her head. She turned in time to see Palling closing the door. He came towards her, smiling, and carrying something in his right hand which glittered.

"Well," he said, "have you told her?"

Breene nodded. "Go ahead."

Palling held out the glittering object. Kitty saw it was a syringe with a needle point. "Let's have your left arm," he said briskly.

Once again the walls drummed at her and Kitty knew she was screaming. She dodged around Palling and ran towards the door. She felt Breene's arms around her throat, choking her. She was dragged backwards towards the marble table. Palling pressed her body against its hard surface. She writhed frantically and screamed until Breene placed his hand over her mouth. She felt a sharp pain in her left arm and lunged, knocking the syringe from Palling's hand. She heard it smash against the legs of the table. The glaring light overhead wheeled suddenly, growing larger like a plunging sun. Then it went far away until it looked like a distant star.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THERE WAS A CLEAR greenish twilight under the trees in Poldrate Street when Violet came away from Joseph Sleep's house. The effect of drinks Sleep had given her was wearing off. She wanted some of her own liquor to recapture the feeling of elation before it was quite gone.

She had been reluctant to bear the news of Kitty's death to Sleep, but the prospect of studying his reaction had stirred her interest. She had not been disappointed. The old man had been quite entertaining. Under the leathery tan he had turned very pale and seemed about to faint. She and Fanny Smallbone had poured liquor down his throat until his natural poise returned. In the process she had contrived to administer to her own needs.

There was no doubt Joseph Sleep was deeply shocked, but Violet had sensed something else under his emotion, a curious excitement. She had come to a definite conclusion, which seemed so absurd she was inclined to attribute it to the liquor. Joseph Sleep seemed pleased.

She wondered how Jimmie would take Kitty's passing. She hoped their association had been too short for him to be seriously affected. With a sudden desire to find out, she walked along Poldrate Street towards the Reckon house.

The Reckon garden was darker than her own, but she entered without hesitation. She was disappointed to find the house in complete darkness. She was about to retreat when the faint patter of fists on a punching-bag reached her. The sound came from somewhere in the rear. Elated, she followed the path.

Turning the corner by the kitchen door, Violet stopped abruptly. The fighter stood, clothed in fighting-trunks, his hard fists encased in gloves, beating a rapid tattoo against the bag. Seated in a rocking-chair, watching the exhibition, she saw the bearded hobo with his pipe. The scene was illuminated by a light above the kitchen door.

Violet stood motionless, her lips parted, gloating over the display of violent grace. His feet planted well apart, the fighter weaved from the hips, his fists keeping the bag in constant play with a piston-like series of flowing blows. In the yellow electricity, his bronzed body glistened silkily.

Unconsciously she advanced, step by step, until she was standing immediately behind Highway. The smell of tobacco smoke made her look down. It was with a distinct shock she found herself looking into two steady grey eyes. There was a quizzical expression in them, as if he had been watching her for several seconds. Violet felt a wave of resentment, for she knew he must have understood what was in her mind. She looked at him sulkily as he rose with a faint bow and placed his chair for her. At the same moment Jimmie Lane finished his attack upon the ball with a furious blow and turned. His mouth opened at the sight of Violet.

Disregarding the chair, she slipped past Highway and caught up the dressing-gown

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thrown on the ground. "That was beautiful Jimmie," she said, purposely deepening her naturally rich contralto voice. She slipped the robe around his shoulders, stretching to the full of her arms. "You don't mind my watching you, do you Jimmie?"

He shook his head. "Of course not."

"I'm lonely, Jimmie. Let's go somewhere for dinner."

"The boy's in training," Highway said softly. "He can't break it two nights running. Some other time, Mrs. Palling."

She turned to the fighter, ignoring Highway. "There's a place in San Fernando where they serve chiken-*a-la*-Maryland under the oak trees. Burgundy, too."

She saw the sudden embarrassment in his eyes and realized he didn't want to go. Kitty was dead but she'd got him after all. It made her furious. Highway took Jimmie's arm. "Come along, son. You'll stiffen if you don't get into a shower."

She was forced to let him go. At the kitchen door he turned to look back. "Sorry, Violet." Highway nodded. "We're both sorry, ma'am."

To Violet's angry senses there was mockery in the grave voice. The door closed, leaving her alone in the garden. She turned impatiently away. She'd get even with the tramp for that, she told herself. By this time the liquor had lost all its effect. Her mind was murky with anger and nervous strain. She wanted a drink and she wanted companionship with the senseless hunger of a hop-head. There was only one other man in the street who could supply her need and that was Mafia Breene.

She remembered suddenly that Breene was down there in his preparation-room with the body of the red-head. She felt a sudden rush of jealousy at the thought of Breene being alone with Kitty.

"Damn that red-head!" she said aloud.

There was a key to the front door of Breene's establishment hidden under the bottom drawer of Violet's dressing-table. Hot and furious as she was, she crept into the pitch-black garden and up to the front door of her house. She flung back the door, switched on the light, and went through into the dining-room. There was a bottle of gin in a sideboard cupboard. With this in her hand, she passed through into the kitchen, leaving glaring electrics behind. From the ice-box she took a bottle of grape-juice and some soda water. She mixed the three into a strong drink and poured it down her throat almost without stopping. She decided the mixture was a little weak on gin and repaired that error with a second drink. Then, holding the third, a long glass slopping over, she started for the second floor.

Half-way up the steps she stopped to drink, and again at the top. The glass, being empty and therefore useless, she dropped it on the floor. The key to Breene's was in its hiding-place. He had given it to her when they first began their affair, but she had never used it before. She slipped it into her stocking, smiling at the slender silken leg. Then she hurried down the steps, kicking the empty glass ahead of her as she went.

At the front gate she hesitated for a moment, and then decided to go around by Happen Street. Breene had been very casual for the last few days, she thought, and if

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was time he was brought to account. Before she inserted the key in the front door of the funeral-parlour she had quite convinced herself Breene was double-crossing her with Kitty. She'd go down there right now and catch them together. That's something not done every day, she thought viciously. Catching a man out who was two-timing you with a corpse.

Stealthily she let herself into the hallway and closed the door. There was no light burning, but she knew every inch of the way and moved without hesitation. She had almost reached the end when she heard steps and voices. She had just got behind the drapes at the entrance to the chapel when Breene and Palling came into the hall from the back.

"How much of a scar will it make?" Breene asked.

"Oh, not much, Breene. I'll do a neat little job. You'll never notice it."

"Well, it'll have to be good not to be seen in a place like that." Breene's voice died away. She heard the front door open and close. What were they talking about? she wondered.

She went down the hall and through the door Breene had closed. It was only a few steps from there along a rubber-carpeted corridor to the entrance of the preparation-room. She closed the door behind her and felt for the wall switch. The big light over the work-table revealed a shrouded form on the table. Kitty, of course. The red hair showed at one end, a tumbled mass. That was odd, she thought. Usually bodies were left *completely* covered.

She crossed to the table and stood looking down at the hair and the pale, still face. She looks as if she's only sleeping, Violet thought. Just the way she did in bed at the house. The men must have been looking at her and forgotten to draw the sheet again. She glanced around, looking for Kitty's clothes, expecting to see the garments on the ground where Breene usually threw them. They were nowhere in sight. Surprised, she thrust a hand under the sheet. Kitty was still fully dressed.

That's odd, she thought, sobering with the effort to understand. He hadn't undressed her. And he hadn't been down here alone with her either. Palling was with him all the time. She shrugged.

"Poor Mafia!" she said aloud. "I've wronged you, darling. You haven't been two-timing me with a red-head after all. And I've wronged you, kid." She patted Kitty's cheek caressingly. "Jus' a little misunderstanding, that's all."

Her hand paused suddenly, remaining motionless. Then she pressed slightly. A puzzled expression came into her eyes. She lifted her hand and looked at the tip of her fingers. Then she pressed both hands against Kitty's face. There was no mistaking it. She could feel warmth coming from Kitty. The girl's face was *warm.*

"By God!" Violet said out loud and stripped back the sheet.

The girl lay on her back, her hands at her sides and not crossed over her breasts. Violet thrust a hand inside the low-cut gown. Then she dropped her head against the breast and listened. There was no doubt about it. The girl's heart was beating steadily.

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She could see the slightly parted lips and the faint lift and fall of the dress as she breathed. Violet hung over the unconscious girl like a vulture and like a vulture she screamed. She seized the prostrate shoulders and shook them violently.

"So that's it, you red-haired devil! He's going to get you that way, is he? Never, do you hear, never!"

Her voice echoed back at her with cumulative violence. With the flat of her hand she slapped Kitty's cheeks until they glowed like fire. "I'll see you and Mafia Breene in hell before I let him get away with it."

Turning, she started across the room in a stumbling run. "Palling'll give me what he gave Sarah Reckon if I interfere, eh? Like hell he will!"

Her right hand closed grimly, imagination already filling the empty palm with the butt of a gun. The corridors echoed with her noisy passage and the banging of doors.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHILE PALLING WENT through the house calling, "Violet, where are you?" Breene remained in the kitchen. He had found a bottle of gin with the cork out. There were also some bottles of soda water and a quart bottle of grape juice, half empty, with the ice-box condensation still on the sides. She's been drinking, Breene thought, mixing himself a gin-and-grape-juice. She's got herself soused. That's why she went out leaving all the lights burning and the front door open.

He was glad Violet wasn't in the house. It would be awkward just now, having her around. He didn't care if he never saw Violet again. He didn't want to see anyone but Kitty. She had red hair. His hand trembled a little when he thought of it. Confound Palling, anyhow. Why did have to come blundering into the preparation-room just when he wanted to be alone with her? That last few moments had been pretty grim, he thought, when they had to hold her on the table before she went out again.

If it hadn't been for Palling, he'd be down there with her now, but the fellow insisted on having him along when he went to see Sleep. Breene poured himself another drink, stepping up the gin content. He was going to need it. He wondered how the old man was going to take it. He had always been a little afraid of Sleep.

He heard Palling stumble over something in the front hall and the sound of breaking glass. When he came into the kitchen he carried the pieces. "Damn the woman!" he said irritably. He stared disagreeably at the drink in Breene's hand. "Cut that out," he snapped. Breene drained his glass and wiped his lips. "Better take one yourself," he advised. Palling shook his head.

"I don't need any liquor for what I'm going to do." He glanced at his watch. "We'd better go before the old man goes to bed." He took the gin-bottle away from Breene and put it in a cupboard. Then he returned the almost empty grape-juice

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bottle to the refrigerator. Breene followed him into the front hall after he switched off the lights.

As they tramped down the curving path, Breene stopped suddenly, catching Palling's arm. He wasn't sure, but he thought something had moved on the path behind. The two men stood listening. Palling expelled his breath irritably. "Come on," he grunted.

Not until they emerged into Poldrate Street did Breene recover from the chilly sensation in the small of his back. The moon had not come up yet. The street was black as the inside of a casket, he thought. The air under the trees was absolutely motionless, and suddenly Breene got a whiff of something odd in it.

He sniffed, turning his head to both sides. It was the same smell he had noticed from the grocer that day in the market when Violet had been with him. It was the smell which accompanies something going to die very soon.

It scared him and he peered anxiously at Palling, but the man went on with long strides, forcing Breene into an effort to keep up. The smell was gone now anyway so he must have been mistaken. Perhaps it was only imagination.

They turned into Sleep's garden and approached the house. The curtains were drawn in the library windows but they could see a faint glow of light behind them.

They passed along the front of the house, away from the library windows. Their feet seemed to make a lot of noise on the front steps. He heard Palling's finger-nails on the woodwork as he searched for the bell-pull. The wire scraped rustily and then they heard the bell jangle. A few moments later the coloured glass beside the door glowed with reds and blues as a light appeared in the hall. They heard shuffling steps inside and Sleep's squeaky voice, sharp with suspicion. "Who's there?" Palling answered and then they heard the rattle of chains as Sleep unlocked the door.

"What do you two want? It'll have to wait until tomorrow, whatever it is." Palling started to push by, but Sleep resisted, his anger increasing. "You can't come in, Palling, I'm busy."

"You'd better let us come in, Joseph. You don't want the whole street to hear, do you?"

Palling's voice sounded loud and carrying in the night air. Sleep appeared startled and irresolute. Palling nodded towards the library door. "You won't want *anyone* to hear what I've got to say."

Sleep stood looking at them with his mouth open. Then he suddenly made up his mind and turned to lead the way.

When Breene went in, he found Sleep behind his desk hastily stuffing papers out of sight. It gave him a thrill as if the papers represented money. That hasty concealment made him realize they were on the trail of wealth and that frail old man was all that stood between them and their objective. Not only wealth but Kitty.

Palling's words brought him back with a jerk. Palling was leaning forward, talking in a low voice as if anxious no one outside the room should hear what he was saying.

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"It's making it a bit awkward for me, Joseph," he said. "The more I think about the matter the less I like it." Breene wished he had listened to the first of it so he would know what it was Palling didn't like. Sleep evidently didn't understand either for he gestured impatiently. "What the devil are you talking about, man?"

"It's the *cause* of Kitty's death, Joseph. I'm not satisfied with my diagnosis."

Sleep stared at Palling, his eyes glittering in the feeble light. "That's up to you, Palling. She's dead, isn't she? Well, find another diagnosis."

Palling nodded. "I've got one, Joseph. I thought maybe you'd like to hear it before I make out the death-certificate."

Sleep studied first one and then the other. "I can't understand ——" he began.

"You will in a moment. I thought the cause of death was due to enlarged thymus, but I'm afraid it's something more serious, much more serious."

"For God's sake say it, can't you!"

Palling nodded. "Very well. Kitty McKay might have died of enlarged thymus or it might have been *poison.*

"You're crazy, Palling. Who'd poison her?"

"*You.*"

Sleep leaned back and laughed out loud. Relief flooded over him. His manner was almost contemptuous. "You're certainly out of your head. Why should I poison her?"

"You're the *only* one who had any reason to poison her, Sleep. You're the one who'd profit by her death and the only one."

"Profit? What do you mean by that?"

The scared look was back in Sleep's face as he glared at Palling.

"You know perfectly well what I mean. With her death, you inherit all her money."

Sleep tried to appear unconcerned. He shook his head. "Kitty had no money," he said. The denial seemed to anger Palling. He stood up suddenly, leaning over the old man. "You're a liar, Sleep. Her grandmother left a will which gives the money to you if anything happens to Kitty. You and nobody else. Now do you see what I mean?"

Sleep collapsed in his chair looking like a bundle of old clothing. "You're a devil, Palling. What do you want?"

Palling's manner was soft and almost friendly. "I thought I'd made it plain, Joseph. We want half of what you're getting."

Sleep was stung to fury. He got to his feet again, screaming. "Not a cent, you thief!" he panted. "I'll have you disqualified for this, Palling. You know what I can do to you."

Breene wondered what he meant by that, but it didn't seem to bother Palling. He shoved Sleep into his chair where the old man sat panting. "You'll have a stroke if you don't control yourself. What good'll the money do you then? Now listen. Either you come across with half or tomorrow I go to the coroner with a request for an autopsy. If it's made, they'll find enough poison to send you to the chair."

"For God's sake, Palling, what are you trying to do to me? I didn't poison her."

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"Of course you didn't, Joseph; but will the police believe it when you say so? I'm afraid they won't. I'm very much afraid they'll point to the unpleasant fact you get a lot of money through her death, and when they put two and two together they'll say you killed her. You wouldn't like that, I'm sure."

"I'll tell them the truth, Palling. I'll tell the truth about *you*, too. You'll never practice again. Never."

Palling nodded. "You *could* do that but what satisfaction would it give you when you're in the death cell? Give us half the money and you can save a lot of unpleasantness."

Sleep tried to speak twice before the words came. "She — she didn't die of poison, did she?"

"That's not the point. If they look, believe me, they'll find plenty."

Breene was fascinated. If Sleep only knew enough to stand pat and refuse to be bullied, he and Palling would be in a frightful hole. But Sleep didn't know and he was on the verge of giving in. Breene saw moisture gather on the waxen forehead. He knows we've got him, he thought. Even as the words formed themselves in his mind, Sleep made a feeble gesture of surrender.

Breene sank back in his chair. He hadn't realized how excited he was. His forehead was streaming with perspiration. As he mopped it with his handkerchief he sensed again the curious odour which had touched his nostrils in the street. The smell of something that was going to die. He looked sharply at Palling sitting easily on the edge of Sleep's desk. Certainly there was nothing about his appearance which suggested death. The man never looked stronger. Breene sniffed again but the faint musky odour was gone. Must be excitement, he thought, and tried to put it out of his mind.

Sleep was talking again, but in such a feeble whisper Breene had to lean forward. The other thing went out of his mind. He was filled with sudden triumph.

"All right, Palling, you win." Sleep lay back in his chair panting. Palling clapped him on the back, laughing. Breene noticed his laughter was a little unsteady and realized he was right about Palling being under a strain too. "Now you're talking sense, Joseph. No reason why we can't all enjoy this money. There's enough for all of us. I'll leave it to you to arrange the transfer, but don't try any tricks. I can always ask for an exhumation order, you know."

The colour was back in Sleep's face. He stood up. "There'll be no tricks, Palling, though why you're taking such risks for a paltry sum like ten thousand dollars —"

He got no further. Palling had him by the throat and was shaking him like a rag. Breene got an arm around Palling's neck, dragging him away. The old man sank into his chair, his face the colour of a bad plum. "For God's sake, Ivar do you want to kill him?"

Palling was suddenly quiet again. He glanced at Breene and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Thanks," he said. "I nearly did, I guess. It was the old snake trying to lie about the money." He leaned over Sleep and spoke quite gently. "I

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know the amount you're getting because I read the letters. If you try to cheat me, I'll raise my share to three quarters. Understand?" Sleep nodded feebly and Palling stood up. "Now you'd better take a hot drink and trot along to bed. Come on, Mafia."

Breene glanced back as he left the library. Sleep sat in his chair, staring horribly at nothing. When they were outside in the garden, Palling drew a long breath of relief. "That's over," he said. "If he doesn't go to the police right away, we have him."

Breene suddenly thought of something. "By the way, Ivar, you've never told me. How much are we getting from Sleep?"

There was a faint hesitation in Palling's manner which Breene attributed to mental arithmetic. "Oh, about twenty-eight thousand."

Breene was a little disappointed. "That's fourteen each."

"Yes. A nice sum, Mafia my boy."

Breene nodded. It was less than he expected, but it was a decent sum.

At Palling's gate they paused. "I'll be over in about twenty minutes, Breene. The quicker we get that little operation done the better. How about your man Monk?"

"He's got the night off. There's a girl in Long Beach so I don't think he'll be back."

"Twenty minutes, then."

Palling tramped away in the dark. Breene stood listening to the sound of Palling's feet in the gravel. It was crazy to think of changing plans at this stage, but he had a growing dislike for the thing Palling's knives were going to do to Kitty's flawless skin. The thought had been struggling into consciousness ever since he had seen her lying helpless on the table in his preparation-room. In his mind's eye he could see the red slash Palling would make. When it was healed there would always be an ugly cicatrice. He kept thinking of that as he walked slowly towards his gate.

Suddenly he stopped, standing in the darkness before his own front door. A new thought had come into his mind and begun spinning about. Why should he allow Palling to mar Kitty's body? What good would it be to him with an ugly scar that got in his way every time he looked at her? He was planning to take Kitty away after the funeral anyway. *Why not do it now?* Why not take her in his service-wagon into the mountains to the cabin already provisioned and waiting for them? No one would ever find them there, he felt sure, and even if they did, he'd have had his fling with the girl. And what's more, she wouldn't have any marks on her either. What did Palling's damned money matter anyhow? Fourteen thousand was a pretty poor price to pay for ruining a perfect body.

Quietly he opened his door and went inside. He was going to need money for his flight and there was Cora's savings providentially under the mattress and not in a bank. There must be a couple of thousand. Plenty to keep him going for a long time in the mountains. His creditors could have the rotten business. It was almost in bankruptcy.

He must make sure of Cora first. He thought she had gone to a picture-show but he wasn't positive. He went down the hall and listened outside her door. There was no sound so he went inside and crossed to His room. He stood for a moment until he saw

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the creature was sleeping. Then he tip-toed to the bed and shoved his arm gently under the mattress.

Suddenly he felt rather than saw a movement in the bed. He looked up to meet the staring eyes fixed on him. His first impulse was to turn and run. Instead he pawed frantically, searching for the bundle. The thing in the bed twisted convulsively. Breene hauled the package out and got to his feet, keeping his eyes averted. He didn't like the sobbing cries the thing was making as if trying to utter words. Without looking back, he hurried from the room. All the way down the hall the frantic babbling followed him.

He went first to his bedroom on the second floor and threw some things into a black bag. In the bottom, under the clothes, he hid the bundle he had taken from His bed. It was larger than he expected and the top note was a ten-dollar bill. Maybe there was more than he expected. There wasn't time to count it now.

Carrying the bag, he ran down the steps again. At the foot a sudden thought struck him. Better lock that front door. Palling might come sooner than he expected and surprise him before he could get away. Then there'd be the devil let loose. He turned the key and switched out the light. The horrid noises were still coming from His room, but they were fainter now. Breene hurried through the underground passage to the preparation-room. He was surprised to find the big overhead light burning. He must have forgotten it when he came away with Palling. Careless, but it didn't matter.

Beside the preparation-table he stopped for a moment, staring at the red hair and pale face. Stooping, he kissed the hair, forehead, and mouth, lingering over the latter. Then he slipped his arms underneath and stood up, exulting in the warm weight. He found her a little more than he expected, and by the time he got along the corridor to the door of the garage she was beginning to slip. He kicked open the door and just managed to stagger to the end of the service-wagon. He was glad it wasn't anything fancy and that his name wasn't painted along the sides. People wouldn't remark its passage along the roads to Bakersfield.

With a finger he flicked up the catch and got the doors open. As he started to slide Kitty along the carrier, some of the red hair brushed his face. It was only by an effort he resisted a giddy impulse to linger. He must get away at once. He wanted to be miles out of the city before dawn.

As he closed the doors of the service-wagon he wondered what Kitty would do for clothes. There were overalls in the cabin which would have to serve. She'd look all the more attractive to him that way, and at long range she'd look like a man. That was something to think about just in case someone wandered into the lonely valley.

He checked the gasoline and oil, taking a few minutes to transfer a few gallons from the hearse. Then he drained the remainder into a spare can. It would save stopping at a gas-station. Attendants might remember if he did.

As he started to open the garage door he suddenly missed his black bag. He ran back to the preparation-room, but it wasn't there. He must have put it down when he

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stopped to lock the door in the front hall. Cursing his carelessness, he ran down the underground passage and up the steps into the rear hall of his house. The place was in utter darkness. He stopped, wondering at the quietness for a moment before he realized the reason. Then he understood. The babbling noises no longer issued from His room. Perhaps the strain had been too much and the creature had gone under.

He hurried along the hall, not daring to turn on the lights because even now Palling might be coming up the path. He had gone almost the length of the hall when he stopped, holding his breath. There was no sound, but he had an odd feeling he was standing very close to something or someone. A vague terror played along the back of his hair. He put out his hands, feeling emptiness all around him. He thought he sensed that queer, dead odour again which he had noticed several times before. He turned half-way around, sniffing, and from the very intentness of the effort lost the thing again. A sudden panic at the thought of so much wasted time sent him forward. He bent down, hunting for the bag.

Once again he experienced that queer certainty someone was close to him. He straightened and started to turn. As he did, something small and round and hard was jammed viciously against his side. He twisted away, but the thing followed, digging into his ribs. There was a blinding flash and a stunning blow which seemed to be *inside* his body. Life swooned away out of him, and in that last moment he knew quite clearly why he had carried the smell of death all evening.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE BLACK BAG in Palling's consultation-room was already packed and the snaps closed. It had been packed for quite fifteen minutes but still Palling lingered.

Ivar Palling was beginning to ask himself why it was necessary to perform the operation at all. True, he had promised Breene the girl's body as a plaything, part of his share of the spoils; but now he wasn't sure if he were justified in running the risk.

There was no use trying to deceive himself about the thing. It was an additional risk and perhaps a very foolish one. But the point was, how long could Breene manage to hold her? Either she'd get away from him before he got tired or she'd meet with a fatal accident after he wearied. He should have realized all this before, but it was easier to kid Breene along. And he really had been interested in the dog experiments. It would be quite a thrill to palm off a living person as a corpse and get away with it. But suppose Kitty escaped from Breene after he'd taken her into the mountains, and before Palling could clear out of Poldrate Street and cover his tracks? That would make things pretty hot for him, wherever he might be. He wanted to settle quietly somewhere and not have the police on his tracks for the rest of his life. Without a hue and cry he could live comfortably for the next forty years.

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With a decisive gesture he crushed his cigarette into a tray and got up. He'd made up his mind about Kitty, and if Breene tried to cut up rough, then he'd have to find some way to take care of Breene. He didn't think he would, though, not if faced with a *fait accompli.* It was all very well being mad about a girl with red hair who was practically asleep in your arms. But he didn't think Breene would feel sufficiently in love with a Kitty who was really and truly dead to risk his neck for her.

Palling glanced at his watch. There certainly was no time to lose. He opened the black bag and took out the syringe. It was the same he had used on Sarah Reckon. He filled it again with a full charge of one hundred units of insulin. Wonderful stuff insulin, he thought. Clear like water. No odour. All he needed was to be alone with Kitty for ten seconds. She hadn't eaten anything for the better part of twenty-four hours so the injection would have the maximum of efficiency. He must keep Breene occupied in some way so he wouldn't know what was happening. Breene knew sugar was an antidote. He'd been foolish enough to tell him that. But unless he got to her inside ten minutes, there was nothing he could do to save her.

He closed the black bag and started for the door.

Leaving the house he remembered Violet again and found time to wonder where she was and what she was doing. It was unlike her to remain so long in obscurity. Well, absent, she was only a problematical source of trouble. Present, she might very easily become a damned nuisance. He walked to the gate, his feet crunching the gravel with every step. His rubber-soled shoes carried him silently along the sidewalk, but at Breene's gate the crunching began again. It didn't matter, of course. There was nothing suspicious about paying Breene a visit.

As he rounded the turn in the path he was a little disconcerted to find the house in darkness. He ascended the steps carefully and felt for the door handle. The door was unlocked so he shoved it open and stood peering into the black entrance. His eyes were quite useless but his nostrils were more helpful. Something in the damp current of air which flowed by from the inside made him sniff suspiciously. It wasn't the usual mustiness which always marked the interior of Breene's house, but a curious acrid odour he could not place.

With his free hand he reached inside and switched on the light. The sprawled body of Breene seemed to rush up at him, almost as if it moved. He smothered an exclamation and stepped inside, closing the door. Then he knelt, shoving a hand inside Breene's vest. Even as he did, he saw the edge of a glistening pool just beyond the body and knew that Breene's wound was in the side.

Palling's heart was beating so hard he could feel nothing at first but the throbbing in the tips of his fingers. Then he saw a faint flutter of the eyelids and Breene was looking at him. There was no recognition in the dull stare. Palling bent closer. "Breene, can you hear me? What's happened to you?"

For a space there was no response. Then a glimmer of understanding took the place of blankness in Breene's eyes. He shifted his position a trifle and groaned. The move

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was enough to show Palling the gun on the floor partly concealed by Breene's coat. There was no mistaking the thing. He'd know that little .32 of Violet's anywhere. Violet's gun and Breene dying on the floor beside it. He'd filled the thing with blanks, but the unfired cartridges in the chamber weren't blanks now.

A whisper startled him and he glanced down. Breene was trying to speak. His lips managed to frame the single word, "Water." Palling nodded and got to his feet. He went along the hall to the kitchen, turning on the light as he entered. He didn't expect to find Violet still in the house, of course, but he looked sharply about as he crossed to the sink and filled a glass. Breene, from the look of him, was done for. Palling didn't think he could live an hour. Maybe less. The sooner he did what he'd made up his mind to do with Kitty and got out the better it would be. He didn't want to be caught in the house with a dead man or even a badly wounded man. With Breene dead and Kitty out of the way, things would be just as he had hoped to arrange them. And as for Violet, her finger-prints would be on the gun and that would take care of her. Things were moving a little too fast for his liking, but if he kept his head there was no reason he shouldn't come out all right.

He must attend to Kitty, but first he wanted to revive Breene, if possible, and hear if he could tell him anything. He might know something useful. For one thing, he'd like to know why Violet shot him. Could it be possible there had been an affair going on between them right under his nose? Could Violet have discovered their scheme about Kitty and done this out of jealousy?

The thought gave him a nasty turn. If Violet knew that much she was going to be an unpleasant problem. He was conscious of having broken out into a perspiration as he hurried back with the water.

He knelt beside Breene and poured a little water between his lips. The fellow seemed stronger, but to Palling's practised eye it was obviously only a passing phase. He set the glass down carefully, well out of reach of any sudden movement. Wouldn't do to let Breene upset it and have water spilled. The damned police would want to know how it got there. He must remember to wipe the glass free of fingerprints and return it to the kitchen.

"Feeling better now?" he asked. Breene nodded. "You'll be all right. Who shot you?" Breene's head moved faintly to one side. "Don't you know?" Again that faint negative.

Palling glanced around the hall and for the first time noticed a suitcase standing just inside the front door. He went over to have a look. He was careful not to touch it but there was no doubt from its weight, when he tested it with the tip of his shoe, that it was packed. Could it be possible Breene was up to something when he was shot down?

"What's the bag for, Mafia?" he asked. Breene ignored the question. "Do something for me," he gasped. "Help me."

Palling shook his head. His mind was quite made up now. "I'm afraid I can't do anything," he said coolly. "That bag over there looks as if you were already on your

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own when you got shot. If that's the way you want it, I see no reason I shouldn't play it that way too. You're on your way out, Breene, so I think I'll send Kitty along with you. Just in case you're lonely."

He stood up and stepped back, picking up his bag. Breene surprised him with a sudden spurt of strength. "Palling, for God's sake, don't touch her ——"

"Just you lie still, Mafia. It won't take long. I'll use the insulin. It's painless, you know. When I come back I'll see if I can do something for you."

He stepped swiftly aside, dodging a pawing movement of Breene's hand, and went down the hall. He heard faint gasping sounds behind and knew Breene was trying to call him back.

The underground passage was dark but he knew his way and made no effort to turn on the lights. He was intent only on reaching the preparation-room, finishing with Kitty and returning to Breene.

Thinking of these things, he was half-way across the preparation-room before he realized that the slab under the glaring light was empty and the sheet crumpled on the floor. For a moment he was stunned. Then his mind linked the vacant table with the packed suit-case in the front hall. What the devil had Breene been up to? Where was Kitty? She couldn't have recovered yet from the injection, so Breene must have moved her himself. He turned and ran out, going from room to room. She wasn't in the chapel, the slumber-room, or the store-room. She just wasn't anywhere. Breene had hidden her. He was going away with a packed bag and he was *taking Kitty with him!*

Cursing and perspiring, Palling ran back along the underground passage. He had to get to Breene and make him tell what he had done with her. He burst into the front hall, running. He saw Breene lift his head at the sound of his approach. Palling came and stood over him, panting. "She's gone," he said breathlessly. "Breene, she's gone!" Damn the fellow, he was grinning. Palling dropped beside him, taking hold of his shoulders. "What have you done with her, Mafia? Tell me."

A spasm of pain twisted the grin into something diabolic. There was foam on his lips. "Wouldn't you like to know, Palling?" he gasped.

Terror began to play tricks with Palling. His voice was shaking as he pleaded. "Mafia, tell me what you've done with her. I'll stop the bleeding and save you. We'll stand together and pull this thing through. We've got to!"

Breene shook his head, still with that hellish grin. Palling wanted to twist it off his face but he didn't dare. "It's no use, Palling," he whispered. "You wouldn't save me if you could. You said so. Go ahead and find her. If you can."

Palling struck him then, a short snapping smash with his clenched fist. Breene's head fell back, his eyes closed. Palling got to his feet and ran down the hall. He had to find that girl or he was done for. He plunged into all the rooms on the ground floor of the house, turning on lights and leaving them. She wasn't there. He was frantic with anxiety and failed to notice His bed was unoccupied. Panting, he climbed to the second floor and searched all the rooms. She wasn't there. She wasn't in the house at all.

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He suddenly remembered the packed suit-case. If Breene were going away, no doubt he'd be using one of his cars, possibly the service-wagon. Then the natural thing was to put Kitty in the car he intended to use. That was it! The garage!

He ran down the hallway and yanked open the garage door. He almost yelled with delight when he saw the service-wagon standing there. It took only a moment to open the rear doors. There she was, just as he expected. There was no time for exultation, he told himself grimly as he dragged the girl out. He stumbled down the hall, carrying the inert body over his shoulder and dumped it on to the slab.

He discovered he had left his bag beside Breene. Grimly he retraced his steps. His wind wasn't what it should be. Imagine getting winded running back and forth inside a house. The undertaker was unconscious. Maybe dead. Palling didn't wait to make sure. He grabbed the bag and hurried away.

He composed Kitty's limbs, adjusted the sheet, and opened the bag. There was the syringe with its harmless-looking dose of insulin. With his left hand he felt through the masses of red hair. Just back of the left ear would do. He was almost vicious as he made the injection and shot the full charge into the blood stream.

Now he must attend to Breene and get out. Quickly he hurried through the underground passage and into the hall. The glitter of the water-glass caught his eye the moment he reached the top of the steps. He must get that out of the way, but he felt it was even more important to make sure of Breene. Insulin for him too. No chance for him to blab.

He knelt beside the unconcious figure, and was just opening the bag when he heard a sound at the front door. In sudden panic he remembered he had forgotten to lock it when he came in. His eyes detected a faint movement behind one of the coloured panes, as if a face had moved. In a sudden wave of terror, he flung the bag up to shield himself from prying eyes. Then he seized the water-glass and fled.

In the kitchen he stopped only long enough to empty the glass, wipe it clean of finger-prints, and drop it on the table. Then he opened the door and ran into the garden. He was almost reckless in his flight to the lane gate. He knew it was difficult to recognize anyone through the coloured glass, and all that mattered now was escape.

He paused at his own gate, listening, before he let himself in. The alley was without movement. Cautiously he entered the garden and crept along. He knew his way blindfold and reached the kitchen door without sound. Once inside his own kitchen he breathed easier. His main worry was Breene. He wondered if the fellow would recover sufficiently to talk before he died. Palling knew he was going to die, but the question was, how soon? It was unfortunate he hadn't been able to inject the insulin. Who the devil had frightened him so at the front door? Could it have been Violet?

He went through the house looking for her and was not surprised when he failed. Now that he had time to think, he realized he was lucky she hadn't put a bullet into him too. Any woman who played with guns like that wasn't exactly a safe person to live with. If she had shot Breene — and it was her gun — she'd probably gone off some-

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where and got drunk. He wondered why she had been fool enough to drop the gun.

In the consultation-room he lit a cigarette and sat down to wait.

He opened a drawer and took out a bottle of whisky. The drink helped him so he was able to control himself and sit down. If only the Negress would come home and discover Breene. He wanted her to make the discovery and come running for him. Waiting like this, with nothing to do, was the most trying part of the whole business.

CHAPTER TWENTY

QUAINT CREATURES, frogs, Highway was thinking. He stood in the shadow of the Reckon gateway, leaning against the post and looking along Poldrate Street. It struck him as an extraordinary thing that he should be standing in the heart of this mysterious place, a veritable jungle in a labyrinth of city streets, and listening to a chorus of frogs. Frogs should be in the swamps, along the margin of sluggish streams, in lonely lakes and prairie pools, but not here in this wilderness of stucco and cement. It was a familiar sound, heard in many a solitary camp from California to Alaska. He felt a nostalgic longing for the open road with sun and wind on his face.

Well, another day or so and he would go again. Lane's head was quite healed; the lad didn't need him any more. He could take his pack and fiddle deeper into the south. But he wished, before he went, he could solve some of the mysteries of the street.

He recalled his curious feeling of evil when first he entered the Reckon house and saw the body of Sarah Reckon sitting stiffly in her kitchen chair with a basket of faded flowers across the room. He had found where the various species grew, had even found the marks of Sarah Reckon's scissors in the beds, but his discoveries unravelled nothing, led to no conclusions. There had been no prints on the scissors. The metal shone without mark or blemish under his dusting powder. It was a very odd thing, of course, but you couldn't prove anything by that except someone's extraordinary care in cleaning them. Under questioning, "Face" admitted it, a fact which threw a different light upon his avowed motive in returning them to their owner's house.

Inside the Reckon house he could see a faint light in the living-room. A shadow passed back and forth as Jimmie Lane continued his monotonous pacing. He had been doing it for a long time now. He seemed to take the passing of the red-haired girl very seriously, despite his careless philandering with Mrs. Palling. Highway wished he had found some opportunity to talk with Kitty himself. He might have learned something, and something learned so often led to other things.

He drew a match down the post. It failed to light but he did not repeat the gesture. It couldn't be possible, of course, that he had heard a shot, but something vague and sharp had coincided with the scratching of the match. The distant hum of traffic in Washington flowed on. There it was again and no mistaking it this time. Merely a

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motor backfire. He was in the act of striking the match a second time when he realized the frogs had fallen silent. It could scarcely have been his own movements with hands and pipe which had disturbed them. Someone must be moving in the gardens. Or could that first sound have been a shot marked by their keener senses?

Once again he lifted the match to strike and again he paused. He could see nothing, but a faint sound had reached him from the dark. It seemed like a scuffling of shoe leather against pavement. The darkness coagulated into a shadow which assumed bulk and solidity as it approached. He waited until the thing was opposite the gate and struck his match.

In the light he saw the Negress, Cora Blessington. She stopped and Highway saw the whites of her eyes as she turned slowly to face him. There was something in her enormous arms which reminded him of a disjointed doll. Then the match failed. He sensed she was going on. He struck another match and caught her arm. It took something of weight to bring her bulk to a halt, like stopping a ship with headway. He held the flame a little closer, peering at her burden. It looked like an overgrown child or a little old man. The huge head swayed loosely over the bulge of her forearm. With a sudden sinking of the heart he realized that Cora's child was dead.

His light failed again and in the silence and dark which closed around them he was conscious of the overpowering perfume given off by the Negress. He wondered why, with a dead child in her arms, she had left the undertaker's house.

"You'd better come into the house with me," he said, pressing against the huge, soft arm. She yielded without resistance, letting him guide her steps. If she thought there was something wrong with the child, why hadn't she called the doctor? He was conscious of a certain excitement and expectancy.

Lane heard them enter and came into the hall, stopping as he saw the burden in Cora's arms. From behind, Highway signalled for caution. Lane led the way into the living-room where they laid the limp figure on the couch. Cora made no effort to interfere when they took Him from her arms. Seeing her now in the light, Highway knew he had been mistaken. She knew her child was dead.

Cora walked to a chair and sat down. She stared straight ahead of her, seeming to see nothing. When Highway spoke she turned her head and fixed a blank gaze on him.

"Tell us what happened, Cora."

For a space it seemed his voice made no impression. Then he gestured towards the figure on the couch. Cora nodded. "He's dead," she said.

"Yes. Won't you tell us how you found him?"

There was silence again. Then Cora sighed and slumped a little. "Mr. Breene's dead."

"Breene!" Highway was startled.

"I killed him," she said, and turned slowly to look towards the couch. He felt she was slipping away from him again and spoke sharply. "Why did you do that, Cora?"

Cora gestured wearily towards the couch and Highway began to understand.

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"Did Mr. Breene do something to your child?"

Again Cora turned her eyes to look at him. Some of the vacancy had gone out of them. He saw the grimness of the out-thrust bony structure under the broad, fleshy chin.

"I've been a good servant to Mista Breene," she said slowly. "He'd no call to do what he did."

"What did he do, Cora?"

For answer she thrust her hand inside her blouse and drew out a heavy bundle of money. She looked at it for a moment, turning it aimlessly in her hands. " 'Taint no use to me now. Not any more. Ah was savin' it fo' Him."

"Mr. Breene tried to steal it, I suppose?"

Cora nodded. "Ah kep' it under His bed. He was watchin' it fo' his mammy. Ah reckon He jus' couldn't stand fo' to see Mista Breene take it away."

Highway glanced at Lane. The fighter nodded. It was pathetically clear. The poor creature on the couch had literally thrashed itself to pieces. Cora, coming home, had found the money gone and the boy dead. She had taken vengeance with African swiftness.

"Why did Mr. Breene steal the money, Cora?"

"He was goin' away, Ah reckon."

"Away? Where?"

She shook her head. A heavy silence settled in the room. Highway worried this new thing like a terrier. Why was Breene preparing to run away, his scheme so urgent he had to steal Cora's money? Could he and Palling have planned something which didn't come off? Or was Breene trying to double-cross Palling? He wondered if Palling knew about Breene's proposed flight.

"Dr. Palling was a very close friend of Mr. Breene's, wasn't he?"

"Yes, suh. They was always together."

"What did they talk about?"

"Ah couldn't say, suh. They didn't talk much when Ah was in the room. They was experimentin' mostly."

"Experimenting?" Highway experienced a sharp throb of curiosity. "What kind of experiments?"

Cora shook her head. "Ah couldn't say that either. They kep' the door locked, but they had a dog in there."

Highway remembered the obvious terror of "Face" Gordon's dog when they tried to make him enter Breene's garden. It was very plain now where the unfortunate animal had spent the time of his disappearance.

Whatever they were doing, Highway felt he must know Palling's reaction to Breene's death. He was casting about for a method when Cora gave signs of getting to her feet. "Ah reckon I'd better go," she said, and glanced towards the couch.

"I'm afraid you won't be able to do that, Cora." Highway spoke gently. The Negress

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looked at him quickly, a frightened expression in her eyes. "You means I's got to stay heah?" she asked. Highway nodded. "There's no use running away. They'll find you anyway."

"The police?"

"Yes, Cora."

For a space she looked at him rebelliously. Then she subsided. "He was no good," she said heavily. "He stole money I was savin' fo' Him."

Highway was conscious of a sharp sympathy for the Negress. She must be about forty, he thought. She had spent long years patiently saving for a helpless creature whose only hope she was. It would have been easy for her, so situated, to ask the State to relieve her of the burden. But she had accepted the responsibility and faithfully performed her task, only to see her sacrifice smashed by the actions of a man she had served. He was conscious of a desire to save her from the law if he could. It was hopeless, of course, hopeless unless . . . A thought came into his head and he got quickly to his feet. "Cora, I want you to promise you won't run away. I want you to remain here until I send for you."

The Negress nodded. It gave him a curious touch of pleasure to feel she trusted him. The desire to help her increased. He gestured to Lane who followed him into the hall.

"Look here, Highway, hadn't we better call the cops?"

Highway nodded. "I'm going down to Breene's place first. There's something I want to see for myself before the law arrives. Want to come along?"

A line of worry appeared in Lane's forehead. "Sure, but won't the police —— ?"

"They'll never know if we delay a bit before we call them. Come along."

They went down the path into Poldrate Street, Highway leading. As they passed the Palling gate, Highway stopped suddenly and spoke in a low voice.

"Come out, 'Face'."

There was a brief silence, followed by a grunt of disgust, and the boy emerged. "How'd you know I was there, Highway?" Admiration and annoyance were mingled in his tones. He doesn't like being caught at his own game, Highway thought. He decided to rub it in a little more. "I didn't," he said casually. "I just took a chance you were somewhere around and it worked."

He could sense the hot indignation in the grey smudge of a face lifted to him. "Aw, gee, what do you know about that? And I fell for it."

Highway could feel his egotism draining away. Do him a world of good, he thought. He's been in the other camp ever since this afternoon when he went for a walk with that Palling female.

"Where have you been, 'Face'? I've missed you."

"Oh, just around." The stiffness in the boy's attitude was still there. "Have you seen Mrs. Palling anywhere about?" That question got him, Highway thought. He felt a nervous reaction in the shoulder under his hand. Could it be possible the boy was waiting for her? He knew his chance guess correct when 'Face' answered. "No

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chance of seeing her. She's gone out."

So he *had* been waiting for her. He wondered if "Face" knew about Breene. "Did you hear anything tonight, 'Face'? A shot or something like that?" Under his hand he felt the boy come closer. His voice was just a little frightened. "I didn't hear it. Highway. Did you?" That meant he knew someone had been shot but he hadn't heard the explosion. "You know about it, 'Face'?"

"I know Breene's been shot, if that's what you're getting at. He's not dead, though."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him through the coloured glass. Palling was with him."

Only by an effort Highway managed to prevent his amazement telegraphing itself through the hand on the boy's shoulder.

"When, 'Face'?"

"Oh, about twenty minutes ago. He heard me and ran out the back way."

Palling knew and hadn't notified the police. What was he waiting for?

"What was Palling doing when you saw him?" asked Highway.

"I couldn't see very well. The glass made it look all kind of funny. He seemed to be trying to get something out of him and Breene wouldn't tell. I saw him hit Breene with his fist."

"You — *what?*"

"Sure I did. Palling kept running away and coming back. He went up to the second floor and then he ran down the hall. While he was gone Breene did something to Palling's bag."

They had come within sight of Breene's front door. The lights glowed mistily through the coloured glass. To his surprise, Highway found the door unlocked and went inside with the others at his heels.

For a moment they stared at the sprawled figure. There was no doubt he was dead now, whatever he had been when "Face" saw him. The body had a curious flattened appearance so that it appeared to be sinking into the floor. Blood was smeared over the oilcloth as if he had crawled about in the act of dying. It was too late now to ask the questions seething in Highway's mind.

"Careful. Don't touch anything."

Highway stepped around the packed suit-case and went closer. He was looking for the weapon Cora had used. He bent over the still form and saw the handle. There was something else which made him stare. Scrawled on the floor close to the dead hand was a single word. The index finger, dipped in blood, rested at the end of the final letter. The word was plain enough. Lane, standing beside him, read it aloud. " 'Insulin.' What's that mean?"

Highway shook his head. He was looking at the gun again, thinking of Cora's finger-prints which must be on the butt, prints that would convict the unfortunate Negress. For a moment he toyed with the thought of wiping them clear and closing the dead man's hand over the handle. There was a chance the police might think it

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suicide, but he realized its vast unlikelihood. It wouldn't do, he knew. Too many people were mixed up in this thing.

So far his movements had been above reproach. He and Lane had heard the woman's admission and come immediately to verify her statement. What next if he wanted to keep clear of police suspicion and criticism? *Call a doctor*, of course. And who but Palling? That would give him the chance to observe his reaction at the news of Breene's death, observe just how much acting the man put into it. If he learned nothing from Palling he would be forced to call the police.

"Stay here, Jimmie. I'm going to fetch the doctor. Come along, 'Face'."

Together they went down the now familiar garden path. Highway was wondering about the word scrawled by the dying man in his own blood. Could it be linked in some mysterious way with the strange experiments the pair conducted behind a locked door on the body of "Face" Gordon's dog?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SOMEONE WAS COMING along Poldrate Street. Both Highway and "Face" heard the steps at the same moment and paused, trying to see the figure against the vagueness which was Happen Street. They knew from the light, quick step it was a woman and from the occasional scuffle that she walked unevenly. "Face" fixed her identity at the same moment Highway understood the reason for the scuffle. "Violet," "Face" whispered. "Drunk," Highway thought.

Not too drunk. Still able to navigate, but evidence of her visit to a cocktail-bar was plainly audible. He wondered how long she had been absent from the street and how much — or how little — she knew of what was going on.

He could see the slender shape clearly now as it came towards them from Happen Street. Beside the Palling gate she stopped. Highway thought for a moment she had heard them. Then a bottle smashed and he knew she had merely paused to drain its contents. Her feet scraped on the gravel path.

Taking the boy's arm, Highway went forward. "Face," he saw with satisfaction, walked with the stealthy tread of the true conspirator. He had a feeling the boy was whole-heartedly with him for the first time since he had been plucked from the darkness inside the Palling gate.

At the gate Highway stopped, restraining "Face." Violet's steps were still audible on the gravel. Then they heard her going up the wooden stairway. "Walk on the grass," he whispered. He led the way along the path, avoiding the shrubbery with accustomed ease. The front door of the house was opened by Dr. Palling just as they reached the turn. In the glow of the veranda light they saw Violet lift one hand in mocking salute. "Hi," she said. Palling stepped out beside her.

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"Where have you been, Violet?"

Violet stood swaying, hands resting on her hips. "Who wants to know, you double-crossing quack?"

Palling stepped aside. "In a cocktail-bar, I suppose." He gestured towards the open door. "You'd better come inside. I want to talk to you."

He dodged as she lunged at him suddenly. Taking advantage of her forward motion, he placed his hand in the small of her back and propelled her through the entrance. He followed and the door closed abruptly.

Then the pair were visible through the windows of the consultation-room. Violet threw herself into a chair. Silently Highway and "Face" crept close to the house and crouched against the wall. The voices were quite plain. "Why shouldn't I go to a cocktail-bar?" Violet was saying petulantly. "You didn't want me following *you* round, did you?"

"Why not?"

Violet laughed unpleasantly. "That's good. He's down in Breene's preparation-room with a red-headed trollop and he tries to play innocent."

"Don't talk about a dead girl like that."

"You make me sick. She wasn't dead when *I* saw her."

There was a sudden movement in the room and a sound as if a chair had fallen. Highway ventured to peer above the sill. Palling was standing over Violet, his back turned to the window.

"When did you see her?"

"I went in after you and Breene left. She may have been drugged but she wasn't dead."

"So you thought Breene and I were planning to have an affair with her. Is that it?"

"What else?"

"Is that why you shot Breene?"

Violet came to her feet, clutching Palling's coat. Her eyes caught the light like a knife blade. "You're a liar. I didn't shoot him. Is he dead?"

Palling shook her off. "If you didn't, your gun did. It's lying beside him now telling the whole world you did it."

Violet's hands leaped at his face. Palling imprisoned them, holding her off. "Damn you, my gun was *stolen*, I tell you. I went looking for it to kill the both of you. When I couldn't find it, I went out and got drunk."

Palling shoved her back into the chair. "You're not drunk now. Get a grip on yourself and listen. If you won't, we're both done for."

"What have I got to do with it?" she snarled.

"You're in it up to your neck whether you like it or not. It's your gun. I'm the only one knows that. I'll help you if you'll help me."

"What can I do?"

"You can keep quiet about Kitty. She's dead. Understand?"

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"But — *I saw her . . .* !"

Palling put his hands over his eyes for a moment. Then he crossed to his desk and took out a bottle. The movement brought him round to face the window, forcing Highway to drop out of sight. He could feel the boy trembling with excitement. He felt excited himself, a queer tense interest, knowing he was about to hear a man convict himself of murder. Violet saw Kitty alive. Palling said she was dead. There could be only one answer to that. He risked a cautious glance over the sill. Palling was back in front of Violet, a glass in his hand. Highway wished he could see his face.

"Breene and I were going to get fifty thousand dollars out of Old Man Sleep. I bluffed him into thinking I could prove he poisoned Kitty. Now Breene's dead, you and I will have it all, Violet. We'll be *rich*."

"*You* killed her!"

"Half an hour ago I gave her a full charge of insulin. She's dead now. She was an heiress and Sleep inherits everything. That's why he's scared. You've got to stand by me. It's my only chance. I'll keep quiet about the gun if you ——"

"Who killed Breene? Did Sleep?"

"It's *your* gun."

"He might have stolen it the other night at the party."

"He wouldn't dare use it. He was half dead with fright."

"Desperation, more likely, Ivar. Maybe he'll try to kill *you*."

The thought seemed to strike Palling unpleasantly. He turned towards the window and Highway dropped out of sight. Over his head he heard the blinds hastily drawn. After that it was difficult to hear. He caught words which seemed to indicate the woman had been won over. Once when Palling, pacing the room, approached the window, he heard him say he was waiting for Cora to come home and find Breene.

He no longer doubted Palling had murdered Sarah Reckon. The woman must have stumbled on the precious pair when they were talking and been killed to keep her silent. Insulin. That explained the word scrawled on the floor beside Breene. There were numerous gaps, but he began to have a hazy understanding of the plot. He suddenly realized "Face" was tugging at his arm, urging him away from the house. "*Come quick!*" he whispered, and began creeping away. Highway followed to the turn of the path. There the boy broke into a run. "Hurry!" he gasped.

This time it was all Highway could do to keep up with him. The boy's legs carried him along Poldrate Street at racing speed. Over his shoulder he urged Highway to hurry. He was ten feet ahead at the Palling gate and nearly forty when he turned into Breene's place. At the Breene front door he paused until Highway came up. Lane stared at them in amazement.

"Come on, you two." "Face" was away again, racing down the hall. Highway gestured to Lane and followed. The boy knew something and it might be worth finding out what it was. They were at his heels when he opened a door at the end of the hall and plunged down into a dark passage. They followed his noisy steps to the

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end where a lighted doorway suddenly appeared. Both Highway and Lane stopped abruptly, staring into the room. They saw a shrouded figure on a table.

"Face" pulled back the sheet, revealing Kitty McKay. "*Look, Highway. See if she's dead. She isn't. I bet she isn't.*"

He watched eagerly while they bent over the motionless form. Kitty McKay looked more like a sleeping girl than a dead one. Her lips were parted slightly and her cheeks faintly flushed. Highway laid his ear against her breast and heard the steady beat of the heart. He looked up to meet Lane's questioning eyes.

"The boy's right," he said. "How did you know, 'Face'?"

Words spurted from him in his eagerness. "I saw Breene empty Palling's syringe and fill it with water from a glass. In the front hall when I was at the door. I *saw* him."

Lane tossed the sheet aside. Then he picked up the unconscious girl and turned towards the door. "Come on," he growled. "Let's get to hell out of here."

"Sleep's house," Highway said.

They went through the front way, passing the motionless form on the floor. Highway glanced at the word scrawled on the oilcloth. The undertaker must have done that after "Face" saw Palling run away, otherwise the doctor would never have left that tell-tale clue behind.

We haven't got Palling yet, he thought, going down the path. They could stop the plot to blackmail Sleep by producing Kitty alive, but they had no actual proof Palling had murdered Sarah Reckon or attempted to do away with the girl. Many a doctor has pronounced a patient dead, only to be laughed at when the corpse came to life. No doubt Palling could bear up under a great deal of laughter if that was the price of escaping trial for murder. Well, perhaps when they had talked with Joseph Sleep some plan to trap Palling might emerge.

Their tramping feet sounded loudly in Joseph Sleep's silent garden. Then they were noisily climbing the veranda steps. As Highway reached for the bell-pull, he thought he could hear a faint ringing somewhere inside the house. It was lost immediately when he drew out the knob and set the heavy bell clanging in the kitchen. They waited for a full minute but there was no response.

"Maybe the old man's asleep," Lane ventured.

"I don't think he'll feel much like that after what Palling's told him," Highway said, reaching for the bell-pull again.

"Face" reached for the door itself. "The housekeeper's deaf," he said and shoved it open. They followed him inside.

The ringing was louder, a lighter note than the heavy kitchen bell. It seemed to come from the second floor, buzzing without intermission. Carrying his burden, Lane went into the library with the others at his heels. They bumped into him when he stopped abruptly, staring at the desk. Joseph Sleep was there, his head down upon his outstretched arms. The tip of one finger rested rigidly on an electric button.

Swiftly Highway crossed. He pressed the stiff finger aside and the distant ringing

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stopped. Lane laid Kitty on the couch and came over. "Dead?" he asked. Highway nodded. "Palling was too much for an eighty-year-old heart, I'm afraid."

"That fellow Palling seems to have been pretty busy," Lane grunted. "What's he done to Sleep?"

"Blackmail," said Highway briefly. There was no hope of help from Joseph Sleep now. Palling might escape after all. He glanced at Lane and found the fighter's eyes fixed on him questioningly.

"Now what?" he asked. "Hadn't we better call the police?"

In Highway's mind a thought began to take shape. It grew until it rang through his body like a gong.

"I've something I want to do first. Give me five minutes more and then I'll call headquarters."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THERE'S ONE STREET in this city I won't forget in a hurry. It's a queer blind end called Poldrate Street, opening off Happen and only about two-thirds of a block long. I'd never heard of it until that night in September. Since then we've heard plenty about it. The newspapers were full of what they called "The Insulin Murder."

I had just come in with my team-mate, Brace, after raiding a rooming-house in Twenty-Ninth Street. We've been together on the Homicide Detail for over two years. We've had some queer experiences but this affair in Poldrate Street was the strangest of the lot. Just after we got back to headquarters that night Sergeant Bleeker sent for us in a hurry.

"If it was April Fool's Day, boys, I'd think twice before I sent you out on this," he said. "You're to go along to the corner of Washington Boulevard and Happen Street and meet a man with a beard. This fellow called in and said there's been a murder down in Poldrate Street. He says unless we play ball the way he wants, the murderer will get away. Better string along with him until you see if he's a nut. Call me when you get something."

Outside we picked up one of the department cars with a driver named Murphy in charge. "Take us to the corner of Washington and Happen Streets," I told him. "Drive without your siren."

He grunted as he swung into traffic. These department drivers take it as a personal insult if they're not allowed to use their siren and bully the rest of the traffic.

About a block before we came to Happen Street I stopped the car and we got out. "Stay here for about five minutes, Murphy. Then move to the corner and wait. Keep your eyes and ears open, but just forget you're a cop. Try to look like a citizen out for a pick-up."

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We walked slowly along Washington, sizing up the street. We passed several undertaking-parlours with parking lots, all dark now. Across the street was a florist shop, brilliantly lighted, and a corner drug-store.

When we approached the corner of Happen Street we walked slowly, watching ahead for the man with the beard, and keeping close to the building fronts. I wanted to see him before he spotted us.

Two or three people suddenly appeared in the curious way they do on streets. One moment there was no one and the next there they were. We were busy sizing them up as they came along, when we heard a voice in our ears. "Good evening, gentlemen." We brought up short and a man stepped from a narrow doorway. "You're from headquarters, I suppose. I'm the man who telephoned."

The light from the florist shop across the street gave us a good chance to see his face. You don't see beards very often these days, particularly in the semi-tropics. This man had one and I must say it suited his face. He had a thick head of hair, and even in the dark I could see he was sunburned like good leather.

Brace got a little on his off side and began feeling for a gun. We always do that when we meet strangers under queer conditions. "What's your name?" he asked. There was no gun on the man's hips so Brace flicked open his coat, looking for a shoulder-holster. He didn't seem to mind because he caught hold of the coat and opened it wide himself. "My name is Highway," he said pleasantly.

"That's a funny name," Brace said. "Where do you live?"

"I don't live anywhere. I'm what you would probably call a tramp. Nevertheless I'm a respectable citizen."

The man impressed me. His speech and bearing were those of a gentleman. I could see Brace felt an unusual quality too. "Get on with your story," I said.

"There are certain things you must know to understand why it's necessary to be careful," he said quietly.

Brace spoke impatiently. "Where's the murder? Who did it? Who got killed?"

Highway pointed slowly along the street. "You see that sign? 'Mafia Breene, undertaking-parlour.' That's the man. His body is on the floor of his house in Poldrate Street, just back of this."

"Who killed him?"

"I'll leave that for you to find out, I'm interested only in seeing you get the right person."

"We'll get him," Brace said meaningly. "Where do we go from here?"

The bearded man turned along Washington Boulevard. "We'll go in the back way if you don't mind," he said. "I don't want anyone to see you yet."

We turned into Happen Street, one on each side of him.

"On Monday night," he said quietly, "a woman named Sarah Reckon who lived in that end house was murdered."

"*What?*" Brace stopped, pulling Highway around. "You mean there are *two* of

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them?"

"Only one corpse now. Sarah Reckon was buried on Wednesday morning by Mafia Breene. That's the man who was killed tonight."

"We'll soon have her out," Brace snapped. "How was she killed?"

"It won't do you a bit of good to examine the body," Highway murmured. "The murderer was very clever. No marks, you understand. I just mentioned Sarah by way of passing the time."

"Oh, you did, eh?" Brace thrust his face close to the beard. "Say, if you think you're being funny ——"

I managed to poke Brace with my left elbow as a warning to shut up. I'm the senior member of the team and he usually takes my lead. I didn't want him to disturb the bearded man's conversation. I had a feeling that either we were being taken for a ride or else we were on the verge of learning a good deal. I motioned Highway to go ahead. We started along the street again.

"You were saying . . ." I prodded.

"Nothing much." He was quite undisturbed. "You'll never find any trace of murder on Sarah Reckon's body. The doctor put her death down to heart failure. Neither will you find out what killed Joseph Sleep. He's dead too, you know."

Brace nearly fell over his big feet. "You mean there's *three* murders?" he gasped.

"I'm afraid a doctor would call Joseph Sleep another heart case," he said. "But just the same, the heart didn't fail until it had been pretty badly frightened. So, in a sense, you might call it murder too."

"Oh, I see." I knew that tone in Brace's voice. He was getting madder and madder. "Anything else by way of a little light gossip?"

"There really isn't time," Highway said regretfully. "We very nearly had another murder here tonight but it didn't quite come off."

Brace gave a short relieved laugh, and I felt that way myself. I knew his mad was all gone because he had suddenly got the idea we were out with a more or less harmless lunatic. I've run across that kind before. They have a tremendous imagination and talk about killings constantly. As a rule, they wouldn't hurt a fly. Brace asked Highway if it were some kind of a game the people played in Poldrate Street.

The bearded man ignored him entirely. We had come to the entrance of an alley off Happen Street. Highway struck a match to light his pipe. I had another good look at his face, and it certainly didn't look like the map of a psychopathic case. As a matter of fact, it was a pretty good face. I've seen a lot in the years I've been on the Homicide Detail. When the pipe was going properly, he pointed down the alley. "This way," he said. "It runs past the bottom of all the gardens in Poldrate Street. Breene's is the last. Quietly, please."

He started down the alley. We trailed along behind our guide. It was pretty dark but we got used to it and managed to avoid the garbage-cans by keeping in the middle. We passed several gates before Highway stopped. "You can use your torch

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now," he said. "The gate's right here."

Brace flashed his torch on a high, wooden gate in a stucco wall half overgrown in ivy. Over the top of the wall we could see trees close together like a forest. Highway opened the gate and we followed him inside. He took us along a path that ran through a regular jungle. I had no idea there was such a wilderness to be found in the city limits. If it hadn't been for the far-away hum of traffic we could have imagined ourselves a hundred miles from nowhere.

Presently we reached a turn in the path and saw the kitchen of one of those old-fashioned wooden houses they used to build back in the 'nineties, the kind with the high gables and all the scroll-work.

We followed Highway into the kitchen where he turned on the lights. It was a big room with a gas-range, an old-fashioned tin sink with brass taps, and oilcloth on the floor.

Highway pointed to a couple of chairs and then sat on the edge of the table, refilling his pipe. "Suppose we talk a bit," he said. Brace ignored the chairs and walked towards him. "This Sarah Reckon, now. You say we can catch the fellow who did it, but we can't prove anything. That right?"

"Yes."

"What's the good of that?"

"None. I think he's been too smart."

"Suppose you show us where Breene is?" I suggested.

"Certainly." Highway pointed to one of the doors. "In the front hall."

"How did you find him?" I asked.

He was off at a tangent again. "I'm staying down the street with Jimmie Lane," he said. "He's Sarah Reckon's nephew."

I remembered that name. "The fighter?"

Highway nodded. "He fights. I'm sure he'd be glad to know you've heard of him."

Brace felt he was on familiar ground. "Sure, I know him too," he said. "I've seen him in prelims. Not lately, though." He was almost friendly as if knowing a fighter made Highway less suspect. I prodded again. "You were telling us about how you found Breene."

"I wasn't the first. Breene's servant, Cora Blessington, came home from a show and discovered the body. I was the first person she met when she came down the street looking for help. I came along here to see if I could help Breene. It was too late. Then I called your department. Very simple really."

That part was simple enough, but why all the mumbo-jumbo about meeting him on the street corner and playing things his way? Highway went on with placid confidence. "You'll wonder why she didn't go for a doctor when she found Breene. There's one right here in the street, you know. Come along and I'll show you."

He knocked out the ashes from his pipe and led the way into a hallway. At the far end the hall widened into a kind of reception-room with a single overhead light burning

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in a hanging fixture. On the floor was the body of a man. There was quite a bit of blood as if he had crawled about. We went forward slowly, careful not to step in anything. Highway pointed to some writing on the oilcloth.

"You'll see from that why Cora didn't go directly to the doctor," he said.

We squatted to get a better look. It was done in the man's own blood with the right index finger resting on the last letter. "*Palling shot me.*" Brace looked up. "Who's Palling? The doctor?"

Highway nodded. "He lives two houses down," he said.

Brace whistled. "What d'ye know about that," he said. "He wrote us a letter. What's the difficulty?"

"The man who shot him doesn't know about the writing," Highway explained. "You'll probably find Breene's prints on the handle of the gun to make it look like suicide."

"What did this Palling shoot him for?" Brace asked. Highway shook his head and shrugged. "I really can't help you there. You see, I've been in the street only since Tuesday morning. I don't know what's been going on."

Brace grunted. "Suppose you take us to Palling's house."

"It's the second house. But I suggest you contrive to have him come here quite on his own."

"How?"

"Telephone, of course."

Without waiting, Highway walked across to a wall 'phone. "I'm going to try a little experiment. Suppose you watch?"

Brace was going to stop him, but I caught his eye. He interested me. We stood by while he called Palling's number.

"Hello, is that Dr. Palling? Doctor, there's been a terrible accident. A man shot. Come over quickly. Please *hurry.*" With that he banged up the receiver and turned towards us with a slow smile. "You will have noticed I did not say *who* was shot or *where*. Yet I predict Dr. Palling will be with us in about one minute."

We were still staring and wondering at the man's cool effrontery when we heard running feet somewhere out front. Highway hadn't said where to come, but here was the poor fool dashing straight into our arms. "You score, Highway," I said. "Quick, Brace, into that room and keep quiet."

"I was about to suggest it," Highway said. I hustled Brace ahead of me into a little sitting-room that smelled abominably of dog, although I was too excited to pay much attention at the moment. We left the door ajar so we could see into the hall. I was down on my knees with Brace above me. Our angle was just right so we could see the body and the front door beyond. We heard feet run up the veranda steps, and then Dr Palling rushed in carrying a black bag. He was a tall, good-looking fellow with a van-dyke beard.

Palling crossed the hall looking at the body. He seemed to miss something, for he

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stopped and glanced around. "Where's the ——" He stopped and looked at the floor. "Where's the *what*, Doctor?" Highway asked in that innocent voice of his. "Nothing. Nothing," Palling snapped. He turned back to the body, and just at that moment he saw the writing. For a moment he didn't seem disturbed, and then all of a sudden he got it. You never saw such an explosion inside a man in your life. He let out a yell and jumped forward. One foot was shoved out ready to smear the words when Brace hurled open the door and jumped at him. How he managed to slam the fellow back and keep clear of the writing himself I don't know. It was a flying tackle and they both ended up on the floor across the hall.

Brace came to his feet, dragging Palling with him. He was shouting that he had been framed and the whole thing was a lie. Brace elbowed him hard in the middle so he shut up and doubled up at the same time. "Nobody told you on the 'phone where the shooting was, but you came on the run. That's how much of a frame it is," he said.

Palling had his wind back. He plunged forward, dragging Brace with him. "There's the gun," he yelled. "I didn't do it. That's my wife's gun. She was having an affair and she shot him because she was jealous."

Brace gave him the other elbow. "You're a kind and loving husband," he said. "Come on, give us the low-down. *You* shot him because *you* were jealous. Isn't that it?"

Palling was almost beside himself. "I didn't!" he screamed. "That's my wife's gun. Breene knew I didn't shoot him."

Brace jumped that like a wolf. "So that's how you knew where to come when the hobo 'phoned. You had been here before. Come on, Palling. *Why did you kill him?* It was because he'd been laying your wife, wasn't it?"

"I didn't. My wife did it. That's her gun. I ——"

At that moment we heard steps at the door and a boy's voice yelling, "Don't, Violet!" I turned round to see one of those furies you read about in *Dracula*, the kind with the staring eyes and the twisted mouths that suck blood out of their victims. It was Violet Palling or, rather—Violet St. Clare as we found out afterwards. She wasn't married to Palling. She'd been listening on the veranda and she heard Palling trying to pin the shooting on her. She didn't say a word but just put everything into action. The boy was hanging on to her arm, but she shook him off. Before I could stop her she knelt beside the body and grabbed the gun. It was hers all right and could she use it!

Palling threw himself behind Brace and squirmed like an eel.

There wasn't any more of him showing at any time than you could use for an outline, but Violet put three bullets into what there was before I could get to her. When I did, she fought like fifty wildcats and the gun kept going off until it was empty. I managed to choke her with a stranglehold across her throat, and even then she hung panting in my arms and glared at Palling. Brace had hauled him from behind and was looking him over. The three bullets had gone into fatty parts where

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they were painful but not serious. I tell you that woman could *shoot*. She'd planted those three pellets in split seconds when the bits of him showed.

"I didn't shoot Breene but I'll shoot you when I get the chance," she spat at him. "You dirty, double-crossing white trash!"

I'd got the gun away from her by this time and slipped it into my pocket. If there were any prints on it she'd ruined them.

"Why did Palling shoot Breene?" I asked her. Before she could answer Highway spoke. "Ask him why he killed Sarah Reckon."

Palling had been leaning against the wall trying to stop the flow of blood where his wife had nipped him. He straightened suddenly, staring at Highway. "What's that?"

Highway went on. "Ask him what he was doing to Joseph Sleep that frightened the old man into dying of a heart attack."

Palling began to babble at that. His face had gone a pasty plum colour and he gasped for breath. "You're a liar!" he shrieked. "You've been trying to make trouble ever since you ——"

At that moment, so help me, the lights went out. I hung on to Violet and yelled to Brace to grab Palling. Then I heard Highway's voice in the dark. "*Ask him why he murdered Kitty McKay.*"

Coming out of inky darkness like that it gave me a turn, but it was nothing to what followed. As I said, the place was like a coal-hole. Then suddenly at the far end of the hall there was a little glow of light. You know how light draws the eye in the dark, so I guess we all looked at once. And right there in the centre of that glow was the face of the prettiest red-head I've seen in many a day. That's all I could see. Just her face and the halo of red hair. The face came straight towards us as if it floated and hadn't any body. It was kind of scary if you're inclined that way, and what it did to Palling was simply awful. He shrieked and I guess he had reason, for he thought that girl was dead and this was a ghost coming to take vengeance.

The hall light came on again and there was the red-head standing with an electric torch in her hand and looking at Highway. "Did I do it right?" she asked. Highway nodded and pointed to Palling. "Couldn't have done it better," he said.

Palling was out completely, fainted dead away. There were steps at the end of the hall and a man appeared. From his build I spotted him for Jimmie Lane, the fighter.

"Hey, Highway," he called. "Are you all through with me at the switch?"

Highway beckoned him to come and join our little party. When he came closer I saw he had several red smears of lip-stick on his face. The red-head saw them at the same time and began mopping his cheek with her handkerchief. Lane looked embarrassed and said something to Highway about Kitty almost making him forget to turn off the lights.

"You *were* a little slow," Highway said. "I had to give the signal twice."

After that there was so much happened and everything all at once I had a terrible job when I sat down to write a report. I remember giving the red-head and her

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fighter strict orders to stay around because I wanted them as material witnesses, though just what they were supposed to have seen I couldn't have told at that moment. I said the same thing to Highway and then I dragged Violet over to the 'phone while I called the department and asked for fingerprint men and photographers.

Twice after that, while I was going over to have a look at Joseph Sleep and while I was coming back, I stumbled over the red-head and her fighter in the dark. They were all tangled up on one of the benches in the garden the first time and the second time they didn't even bother with a bench. It was all right with me just so they stuck around until someone came from headquarters to take them into custody. Brace and I couldn't do *everything*, you know.

That was why when we went looking for Highway later we couldn't find him. That kid, young "Face" Gordon, who testified afterwards he saw Breene change the insulin in Palling's syringe to water, told me he saw Highway going down Happen Street just before dawn carrying his bundle with the end of a fiddle sticking out of it. I asked the kid where Highway was heading and he said he thought he was going north. I wanted that bearded playboy badly because he knew far too much. I called the department and had them send out a general order to look for a well-dressed tramp with a brown beard, carrying a bundle with a fiddle sticking out of it. That was six months ago, and they're still looking.

THE END

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